

DYLAN RILEY

TONY JUDT:

A COOLER LOOK

ACCOLADES CONTINUE TO be piled upon the historian Tony Judt, following his untimely death in August 2010. For the *Guardian*, he was ‘a fearless critic of narrow orthodoxies’, ‘a great historian’, ‘a brilliant political commentator’. For the *New York Review of Books*, ‘a source of inspiration’, who sought to ‘embrace difference’—‘like Isaiah Berlin’—within historical accounts that were ‘harmonious, convincing, and true’; like Camus, Blum and Aron, Judt knew what it was to bear the intellectual’s ‘burden of responsibility’. To the *Economist*, he was ‘erudite and far-sighted’, ‘a meticulous intellect’—‘an intellectual with a capital I’. More circumspectly, the *New York Times* saluted his ‘deep suspicion of left-wing ideologues’.¹ In June 2011 a Paris conference, jointly organized by the NYRB and CERI SciencesPo, celebrated Judt’s ‘scholarly rigour, elegance of style and acuteness of judgement’. Morally, he was ‘fearless’, ‘prophetic’, a new Orwell; intellectually, he was ‘formidable’, possessed of a ‘forceful lucidity’; as a historian of French political life, happily ‘inoculated against the revolutionary ideas that had been the stock in trade of the intellectual *engagé*’.² To what extent are these plaudits confirmed by a sober examination of Judt’s work, held to the normal scholarly standards of intellectual coherence and empirical plausibility? What follows will offer an evaluation of his writings, as the necessary precondition for an adequate assessment of his contribution as historian, publicist and scholar.

Tony Judt was born in 1948, the son of Jewish immigrants, and brought up in lower-middle-class circumstances in London’s south-west suburbs. ‘Coming from that branch of East European Jewry that had embraced social democracy’, he would explain, ‘my own family was viscerally anti-Communist.’³ Educated at a small South London private school,

he served as national secretary of a Labour Zionist youth organization before going up to King's College, Cambridge in 1967. Post-graduate study took him to the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, where he seems to have acquired his life-long distaste for Marxist intellectuals; and thence to southern France, where he undertook doctoral research on the history of French socialism in the Var. His first two books would draw extensively on this work: *La Reconstruction du Parti Socialiste, 1921–1926* was published in Paris in 1976; *Socialism in Provence, 1871–1914*, a 'study in the origins of the French left', appeared three years later.⁴ The mid-70s was a time of heightened establishment concern in France at the prospect of a joint Socialist–PCF election victory, in the aftermath of the Portuguese revolution. This background informs the central preoccupation in both Judt's books with why France had failed to produce a reliable social-democratic party, on the Anglo-Nordic model. Unlike its solidly anti-Communist counterparts, the British Labour Party or German SPD, the Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière (SFIO) had never quite shed the lexicon of Marxism and still appealed to a notion of socialism even after 1945, when its political practice was otherwise quite 'acceptable'. The themes of his doctoral research would prove to be central to much of Judt's subsequent career.

I. THE FRENCH LEFT

Judt's first book, *The Reconstruction of the Socialist Party*, examined the re-establishment of the SFIO after its historic split at the 1920 Congress of Tours, where a large majority of the delegates had opted for the Third

¹ Respectively, Geoffrey Wheatcroft, *Guardian*, 9 August 2010; Timothy Garton Ash, *NYRB*, 20 August 2010; *Economist*, 12 August 2010; William Grimes, *NYT*, 7 August 2010.

² 'Fearless': *Economist*, 12 August 2010; 'prophetic': *Guardian*, 9 August 2010; 'formidable': Chris Patten, *Observer*, 11 April 2010; 'forceful lucidity': Fritz Stern, contribution to *NYRB–CERI SciencesPo* conference, 'Tony Judt: A Distinctive Presence Among Us', 23–25 June 2011; 'inoculated against revolutionary ideas': Samuel Moyn, contribution to *NYRB–CERI SciencesPo* conference.

³ Judt, 'Elucubrations: The "Marxism" of Louis Althusser', *The New Republic*, 7 March 1994; collected in *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century*, London 2008, p. 106.

⁴ *La Reconstruction du Parti Socialiste, 1921–1926*, Paris 1976; future references will anglicize the title. *Socialism in Provence, 1871–1914: A Study in the Origins of the Modern French Left*, Cambridge 1979.

International and moved to found the Parti Communiste Française. In Judt's view, it was the presence of a militant PCF to its left that forced the SFIO leadership to compensate for its reformist political practice with verbal commitments to socialism. The SFIO rank and file insisted that the party 'remain what they had made it'; any attempts to dilute its message would have played into the hands of the PCF. As Judt put it:

The way was narrow: a too marked *rapprochement* with the PCF could allow the more radical and rigid party to destroy it, but too sharp a break from the communists could lead to the loss of elements who had remained in the SFIO only on the condition that it retained a revolutionary Marxist position.⁵

The 1920 split had not cleanly separated reformists from revolutionaries, as happened in other northern European socialist parties after the Bolshevik Revolution; instead, a section of the left remained with the rump SFIO led by Léon Blum, constituting a majority of its membership. Apart from a small, right-wing faction, all the SFIO delegates rejected collaboration in bourgeois governments and advocated the dictatorship of the proletariat. Judt reported that Socialist mayors were obliged to get party approval before inaugurating Monuments to the Fallen, a sharply divisive issue for the party in the aftermath of the Great War. The SFIO leadership initially hung back from rejoining the reconstituted Second International, preferring to support the Union of Vienna, the '2.5 International' established by the Austro-Marxists, although it duly signed up in 1923. Rank-and-file attitudes exercised a decisive restraint on the SFIO's parliamentary leadership: in 1924 Blum and his fellow deputies were obliged to lend only external support to the Radical government under Edouard Herriot—as it pursued a programme of austerity at home, imperial war in Morocco and military occupation in the Ruhr—since the party membership would not tolerate full participation. Here was an example of the high price paid by the SFIO for the ideological 'rigidity' necessary for its survival, given the ever-present pressure from the left exercised by the PCF.⁶

The Reconstruction of the Socialist Party was rapturously received in liberal-Atlanticist circles in France, where it was published by the National Political Science Foundation with a fulsome preface by the ex-Communist

⁵ *Reconstruction of the Socialist Party*, pp. 45; 154.

⁶ *Reconstruction of the Socialist Party*, pp. 10; 62–3; 146; 195; 184.

Annie Kriegel, whom even Judt was later to describe as having gone from 'full-blooded party dogma to conservative anti-Communism'.⁷ Its warnings of the baneful effect of the PCF had obvious lessons for those tempted by the Union of the Left in the mid-70s. Anti-Communism had been the standard ideology in the Anglophone world all through the Cold War; but in France it only really became a *doxa* in the mid-70s. Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* was translated in 1974 and François Furet's influential *Rethinking the French Revolution* was published in 1978. In this context, Judt's hostile account of the PCF's influence in the 1920s was the perfect calling card; a long-existent Anglo-American anti-Communism converged felicitously with a rising French one.

Judt's second book, *Socialism in Provence, 1871–1914*, tracked back to a time before the baneful influence of the Comintern had been felt, aiming to rescue a vision of the modern French left as 'neither a *victime du marxisme* nor the latest in a succession of crypto-Jacobins'.⁸ Drawing again on his doctoral research in the Var, Judt argued that the areas of late-nineteenth-century Socialist success were districts where small peasant proprietors were predominant, rather than sharecroppers or day labourers. The collapse of agricultural prices in the last decades of the nineteenth century had radicalized this layer. Picking up on Eric Wolf's idea of the 'middle peasant', Judt suggested that their relative economic autonomy gave small proprietors the capacity for independent action, while their vulnerability to market conjunctures, especially after the turn to viticulture, made them supporters of state protection for agriculture. Early Socialist programmes spoke directly to smallholder interests; initially, the Var peasants were 'responding to an ideology which appealed to them in class terms' in lending the party their support. Subsequently, this attachment would congeal into an unbreakable political tradition: 'voting for the Socialists formed part of the "historical" character of Provençal life, long after the SFIO had ceased to perform any obvious function on behalf of the local population and had indeed lost much of its revolutionary character and programme.'⁹ In sum, material interests explained the rise of socialism, culture its perdurance.

⁷ Kriegel writes: 'A beautiful book, written with the concise vigour that only familiarity with the sources, implacable clarity of method, well-honed analytical thinking and the elegance of a highly strung discourse can supply': *Reconstruction of the Socialist Party*, p. i. For Judt's comment, see *Marxism and the French Left: Studies in Labour and Politics in France, 1830–1981*, Oxford 1986, p. 209.

⁸ *Socialism in Provence*, p. ix.

⁹ *Socialism in Provence*, pp. 236–7; see also pp. 229–30.

As a work of empirical scholarship *Socialism in Provence* towers over Judt's later output, its extensively documented analysis revealing a careful social historian. The last chapters turn towards a more general discussion of French politics and the peasantry. Judt's argument here is a familiar one: the persistence of a broadly Marxian socialism in France was due to the large number of peasant smallholders, combined with the early introduction of universal suffrage: both legacies of the French Revolution.¹⁰ France's backwardness, far from being a disadvantage for socialism in France, explained why it had done so relatively well. Judt gave a nod to modernization theory, agreeing that 'the potential for revolution' is greatest 'in the early years of capitalist development'. But its explanation was limited in the French case, because socialism did not disappear as the country modernized.¹¹ Overall, however, the story was clear: French socialism rested above all on a peasant base, and as such was a consequence of economic backwardness.

In Furet's footsteps

In an unguarded moment, Judt himself would remark that 'at some point between 1973 and 1978 Marxism, and the study of its theoretical implications and resonances, lost its stranglehold upon the intellectual imagination in France, a grip it had exercised unbroken for a generation. In the space of less than a decade it became fashionable to be not just non-Marxist, but anti-Marxist.'¹² Indeed; both his early works chimed perfectly with the dominant Parisian mood. Judt's next book—he was ensconced, from 1980 to 1987, at St. Anne's College, Oxford as a PPE tutor—was also well-angled to catch this favourable wind. Published in 1986, *Marxism and the French Left* was Judt's first foray into intellectual history. It had an unusual structure, to say the least: dense chapters on the nineteenth-century labour movement and the fortunes of the SFIO from 1920–36 were followed by a highly polemical presentation of French Marxism during the *trente glorieuses* of 1945–75, topped off by a paean to Mitterrand's victory in 1981.

Linking these apparently disparate topics is a highly selective narrative of the French left, occluding the anti-Nazi Resistance—indeed, dispensing with any analysis of the PCF. An ostentatiously partisan tone and

¹⁰ *Socialism in Provence*, p. 302.

¹¹ *Socialism in Provence*, p. 292.

¹² *Marxism and the French Left*, p. 170.

a marked decline in scholarship set *Marxism and the French Left* apart from Judt's earlier work; it also suffered from a notable deterioration in internal coherence, as Judt attempted to put forward two mutually contradictory arguments in the same breath. On the one hand *Marxism and the French Left* claimed, following Furet, that the French left had historically been blighted by an adherence to 'revolutionary doctrines', with little countervailing experience of Anglo-Saxon liberties. During the course of the nineteenth century, post-1789 republican traditions had segued into Marxian ones, facilitated by the overlap of the two between the 1860s and the 1930s. On the other hand, Judt informed his readers that it was only after 1945 that 'consistently critical attitudes to capitalism' had taken hold on the French left, though mercifully 'their hegemony has been brief; in the 1980s it is again no longer a requirement of the left that it condemn profit, economic exploitation and wealth', as Mitterrand's presidency had shown.¹³

The explanation that Judt had confidently offered for the persistence of the revolutionary tradition in his earlier works is—just as confidently—reversed, without a word of explanation, in *Marxism and the French Left*. In 1979 *Socialism in Provence* had depicted nineteenth-century France as an economically backward society, with a precociously developed state. In 1986 *Marxism and the French Left* presented it as an economically developed society with a backward, 'illiberal' state:

France was an industrial society with all the characteristic industrial landscaping—massive conurbations (Lille-Roubaix-Tourcoing, St Etienne), fast-growing metropolitan cities (Paris, of course, but also Marseilles, which grew from 185,000 to 315,000 during Louis Napoléon's reign), gross extremes of wealth and poverty.¹⁴

In promoting mid-nineteenth-century France to the rank of a fully industrialized society, Judt directly contradicted his previous account of the strength of French socialism being due to its anchorage in pre-industrial soil. Without ever mentioning this, he now offered a new explanation for the persistence of the revolutionary tradition: the repressiveness of the Second Empire. After the massacre of the workers in 1848, the French labour movement no longer saw the state as a neutral arbiter of class conflicts but rather as an instrument that 'would always be used at the expense of the working population'. The French, then, had never

¹³ *Marxism and the French Left*, p. 10.

¹⁴ *Marxism and the French Left*, p. 33.

experienced 'that political liberalization which so confounded observers and protagonists after 1848 in other countries.'¹⁵

The chapter on the inter-war experience of the SFIO in *Marxism and the French Left* similarly recasts, without explanation, Judt's earlier analysis in *Reconstruction of the Socialist Party*. Even after the split at the Congress of Tours, in which the PCF hived off most of the industrial working-class members, leaving the SFIO as a cross-class, regional party, Socialist leaders continued to stress extra-parliamentary agitation: 'for Blum, almost as much as for the party left, elections were a means to spread the socialist word, and only secondarily did they serve to elect men to parliament, or even a local council'. Whereas Judt earlier suggested that the reasons for the SFIO's failure to become a responsible social-democratic party lay in the existence of the PCF, he now argued that both the SFIO and the PCF were rooted in a common political culture, tainted by 'revolutionary doctrine'—much more in line with Furet's thinking.¹⁶

Marxism and the French Left's discussion of the post-war intellectual scene—Judt's first stab at Sartre—was strangely sandwiched between this chapter on the SFIO and another on Mitterrand. It asked why it was that French Marxism, backward in comparison to its German and Italian counterparts up until the 1930s, had flowered in the post-war period and then collapsed. According to Judt, this arc reflected the political strength of the PCF, whose attraction for the intelligentsia simply reflected the prestige of Stalin. 'As a theory of radical politics', he declared, 'Marxism died with Stalin'.¹⁷ The argument fails the elementary test of chronology: the two greatest products of post-war French Marxism, Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and Althusser's *Reading Capital*, were published in 1960 and 1968, respectively.¹⁸ As intellectual history, this was crude and shoddy stuff, not least because of Judt's relentlessly polemical intent—Communism, Marxism and Stalinism predictably presented as interchangeable terms. Judt made no attempt to reconstruct the ideas of post-war French thinkers, instead flaunting the fact that he had been

¹⁵ *Marxism and the French Left*, p. 96.

¹⁶ *Marxism and the French Left*, pp. 149; 158–60.

¹⁷ *Marxism and the French Left*, p. 236.

¹⁸ More generally it could be argued that, like other forms of Western Marxism, French left-wing thought in this period developed in a context in which official communist parties seemed increasingly unable or unwilling to act; the main theoretical concepts of this tradition—reification, seriality, interpellation—were designed to explain the reproduction of capitalist social relations.

‘selective’ in his treatment and that his approach had been to deny them any ‘intellectual autonomy’; why should anyone take Sartre, for example, ‘very seriously’?¹⁹ With protocols like this, it is not surprising that Judt’s account was not only littered with Cold War grotesqueries—Sartre and Beauvoir making a ‘daily contribution’ to ‘the enslavement of the satellite states’—but with extraordinary philological howlers: Althusser, radical critic of Hegel, transmogrified into a ‘passionate Hegelian’; Régis Debray labelled a fellow-thinker of Lévy and Glucksmann as a theorist of ‘totalitarianism’, rather than famously contemptuous of both the *nouveaux philosophes* and their theories.²⁰

Marxism and the French Left had, of course, a happy ending. Judt waxed lyrical about what he called Mitterrand’s ‘electoral revolution of 1981’: after more than a century, French politics had finally been normalized. The new Parti Socialiste had broken out of its class, regional and religious ghettos; now a responsible reformist force, its only remaining task was to ‘acquire the political culture of a party of government’ like the Swedish or Austrian social democrats. Mitterrand’s victory was ‘a major turning point in French political history, of qualitatively greater significance than any hitherto’—‘for the Socialists, 1981 was their finest hour’. Not only had Mitterrand and his party ‘transformed national politics in France’, but they had firmly dissociated the left from ‘internationalism and anti-militarism’ and could now be trusted on ‘defence’.²¹

The French historian

Judt’s first cycle of work, focused on France, comes to a close with *Marxism and the French Left*. How should it be assessed? Historiographically, the argument of *Socialism in Provence* is obviously superior to its successor. France’s industrialization was relatively slow in the nineteenth century; it had a large artisan and peasant sector—still almost half the population in 1945; yet it had introduced effective male suffrage as early as 1848. But such an account, linking political consciousness to class structure, raised a problem for Judt: it was too Marxian. Indeed his discomfort with it was clear even in *Socialism in Provence* where, after carefully establishing the link between peasants’ economic interests and the emergence

¹⁹ *Marxism and the French Left*, p. 15.

²⁰ *Marxism and the French Left*, pp. 198; 229.

²¹ *Marxism and the French Left*, pp. 296; 290; 295.

of socialism, he abruptly abandoned it, without theoretical or empirical motivation, to embrace a cultural explanation for the movement's continuing appeal. Whatever the risk of conceptual incoherence, the switch was effective as a sort of historiographical *cordon sanitaire*, insulating twentieth-century France from class analysis.

Even hedged and sterilized, however, *Socialism in Provence's* attempt to link politics to class interests was beyond the pale in the mid-1980s, when Furet and his followers had entirely hegemonized the field. It was this, rather than any underlying intellectual problem, that surely explained Judt's tacitly revised interpretation in *Marxism and the French Left*, so dramatically at odds with his first. Yet the central premise on which this new version rested, that late-nineteenth century France was a politically backward society, is patently false. Judt attempted to assimilate the French, Italian, and Spanish states of the period into the same type,²² but this did serious violence to their respective political histories. Universal male suffrage, for example, did not come to Italy until 1912, or Spain until 1931; it was definitively established in France by the 1880s. More importantly, France had created national representative institutions by the end of the eighteenth century, unlike any other large state on the European continent.

If Judt failed to provide a compelling historiographical explanation for the appeal of Marxism to a significant layer of French workers, peasants and intellectuals, what of his second argument: that its soft spot for *marxisant* precepts was responsible for the French left's lack of political success for most of the twentieth century? The issues here are complex, and Judt's thinking far from consistent. Clarity requires first defining what 'success' means. For Judt this was obvious enough: a 'normal' social democracy. But it is unclear from a strictly historical point of view why this should be the standard. Judt's doctoral thesis exemplifies the problem. One of the strengths of *Reconstruction of the Socialist Party* was its documentation of the broad ideological commitment to revolutionary socialism within the SFIO; Blum himself in the 1920s held that an 'impersonal dictatorship of the proletariat' was an absolute necessity. But in that case, the historical question is not: why did the SFIO fail to act as a reformist social-democratic party, but rather: why did the SFIO fail to live up to its own self-understanding and act

²² *Marxism and the French Left*, p. 11.

as a revolutionary party? Judt had evidently registered this problem in his first book, admitting that, in the 1920s, a programme of revolutionary transformation 'did not lack plausibility'; but he characteristically dismissed this line of thinking, on the grounds that even to ask such questions would be to apply a 'logical' rather than a historical standard.²³ Historiographically, of course, the reverse is the case: Judt himself was applying an abstracted 'logical' standard, in judging the inter-war SFIO from the perspective of post-war social democracy.

The political dénouement of Judt's decade-long engagement with the history of the French left was his celebration of the Mitterrand era. But here too his analysis proved dud. According to his—albeit self-contradictory—arguments, the 'normalization' of French politics in the 1980s, with Mitterrand's victory and the elimination of the PCF as an electoral force, should have led at last to an effective social democracy. In fact, of course, Mitterrand's legacy was the introduction of a gallicized Thatcherite neo-liberalism and, after 1990, abandonment of the last vestiges of Gaullist foreign policy for full participation in the new Atlantic order. Yet if Judt's labours in the vineyard of French history produced decreasing historiographical or analytical rewards, his exposure to the methods of Furet and his disciples played a critical role in expanding his repertoire as a pro-Western polemicist. Handily, he would find in the 'ethical turn' fashionable in late Cold War Paris a rhetorical stance and sententious tone that married perfectly with anti-Communist sermonizing. So, in *Marxism and the French Left* he explained:

To be a socialist today is to find oneself in one of two positions. On the one hand, you can be in favour of a generalized *moral project* which asserts itself in conscious defiance of capitalist (interest-related) priorities. Or else you must argue from a series of premises, stated or otherwise, which are still best characterized as 'marxism', and which entail firm commitment to certain propositions about the life span and self-destructive properties of capitalism.²⁴

Judt went on to lament: 'it is the unwillingness of most socialists in France to think of themselves as engaged in a project of an essentially indeterminate and partial kind that prevents them adopting the first of the two approaches.' The second—any theory of capitalism as a system

²³ *Reconstruction of the Socialist Party*, pp. 88; 82; 91.

²⁴ *Marxism and the French Left*, p. 298; emphasis added.

with its own laws of motion—led, he asserted, straight to Soviet-style totalitarian Communism.²⁵

2. MANHATTAN

In the late 1980s, apparently bored by French history (and by his wife),²⁶ Judt followed the trail blazed by Timothy Garton Ash and numerous others to Eastern Europe. Gorbachev's diplomacy had removed any obstacles to humanitarian tourism and the region was now thoroughly penetrated by missionaries from the EEC and IMF–World Bank. A crash course in Czech, and meetings with Michnik, Havel and Kis, equipped Judt to present his credentials to Washington in the form of a paper given at the Wilson Center in 1987, 'The Politics of Impotence?'. From the vantage point of 2009, Judt would explain Czechoslovakia as his Mitteleuropa destination of choice in terms of its edgier national-cultural stereotype: 'that distinctly Polish (or Russian) sense of cultural grandeur was precisely what I wanted to circumnavigate, preferring the distinctively Czech qualities of doubt, cultural insecurity, and sceptical self-mockery.'²⁷ At the time, however, his justification had been exactly the opposite: for Czechoslovakians, Judt suggested in 1987, 'the whole point of intellectual production is to bear moral witness'. Freed—as the interrogative ironization of the title tried to indicate—from any concrete political engagement by the force of circumstance, intellectuals like Havel answered to a higher 'moral responsibility', just as Judt had told French socialists to do. 'The Politics of Impotence?' reported that, since 1968, oppositional Marxism in Eastern Europe had been replaced by a healthy focus on 'rights'. Nevertheless, it warned, 'to the extent that socialism is associated with a variety of welfare provisions, social-security systems and guarantees, a "return" to capitalism would not be regarded with favour by most people.'²⁸

Judt's re-location to the French Institute at New York University took place the same year, 1987. Shortly after, he scooped a \$20 million bequest

²⁵ *Marxism and the French Left*, p. 298.

²⁶ Judt, *The Memory Chalet*, New York 2010, pp. 165–72.

²⁷ *Memory Chalet*, p. 171. Allowance should of course be made for the author's failing health after 2008.

²⁸ Judt, 'The Politics of Impotence?', in Judt et al., eds, *Debating the Nature of Dissent in Eastern Europe*, Washington 1987, pp. 38; 6–7; 13.

from the 80-year-old Manhattan socialite and former Ziegfeld Follies star Paulette Goddard, who had accumulated a fortune in the course of several marriages (Charlie Chaplin, Burgess 'The Penguin' Meredith, Erich Maria Remarque). NYU's Remarque Institute would open its doors in the late 90s, under Judt's direction.²⁹ In the meantime, he produced a further reworking of his thoughts on post-war French intellectuals: published in 1993, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944–1956* was coolly received by specialist scholars but garnered fawning reviews for the director of the Remarque Institute in the key power-and-prestige outlets of the American academy; it also won Judt his first commission from the *New York Review of Books*.³⁰

To return once again to the subject of the post-war *rive gauche* might appear to have been flogging a dead horse, especially now that the Cold War had ended. But Judt seems to have felt that *Marxism and the French Left* had dealt with Sartre and his contemporaries too much in terms of French politics. Now—and with little further reading required—he would lambast their record in the larger global struggle of freedom against Communism, at greater length and brandishing loftier, if still ill-defined, concepts: justice, responsibility, morality and ethics. The Berlin Wall had fallen, but it still remained to extirpate any lingering trace of left-wing ideas. In France, a rabid anti-Sartrean literature had been accumulating since the late 1970s but little of it had yet appeared in English. Casting himself as a courageous moralist, Judt recycled its tropes—principally, that Sartre and Beauvoir were Stalinist apologists—rejecting any mere 'neutral historicist account': 'In seeking to explain something that is intrinsically unattractive, to which the reader would normally respond with distaste, one is not excused from the obligation to be accurate, but neither is one under a compelling obligation to pretend neutrality.'³¹

²⁹ As Judt would gloat in his final interview: 'When I explained at a lunch in St John's College, Cambridge how Remarque worked, how much cash we had and how free I was to spend it as I chose, you could see them gagging . . .': *Prospect*, July 2010.

³⁰ Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944–1956*, Berkeley 1992. 'Anyone interested in the history of twentieth-century French intellectuals will race through the book *Past Imperfect* with unflagging attention': Robert Wohl, *Journal of Modern History*, 1995; 'undeniable power and importance': David Schalk, *American Historical Review*, 1994. For a better-informed critical account see Carlin Romano's review in *The Nation*, 26 April 1993.

³¹ *Past Imperfect*, pp. 7–8.

Here, still more openly than in his previous work, Judt spurned any serious discussion of his subjects' thought: 'This book is neither a history of ideas nor a social history of French intellectuals'; it is about 'the marked absence of a concern with public ethics or political morality' in France—which Judt quickly interpreted, before the reader had time to murmur *Les mains sales*, as: 'why the French response to totalitarianism differed from that of intellectuals elsewhere'.³² Although presented as an exercise in 'a peculiarly Anglo-Saxon tradition of intellectual history', the result had nothing to do with the Cambridge School; it was more like a posthumous contribution to the literature of the Congress for Cultural Freedom. Judt proceeded chiefly by undocumented assertion, anonymous attribution or conjunctive assimilation—typically: 'How, in the face of all this evidence, could intelligent people wilfully defend communism as the hope of the future and Stalin as the solution to the riddle of History?'—as though any thorough-going critic of capitalism was also necessarily a worshipper of Stalin.

Sartre's actual record on the Soviet Union—the criticisms of Stalinism in *What is Literature*, the excoriation of the camps and of the invasion of Hungary in *Les Temps modernes*—is simply scanted. 'Sartre's philosophical thought during the 30s and early 40s was quite devoid of political and social implications', writes Judt—the *War Diaries*? *Being and Nothingness*? 'Sartre's contemporary opinions precluded any attention to questions of ethics or morality'—*Saint Genet*? *Notebooks for an Ethics*? The French radical tradition was 'dominated by a combination of republican premises and Marxist projections, conflating the capacities of the state and the interests of the individual'—but wasn't Existentialism founded on the idea of radical individual freedom? 'One very special characteristic of the French style of thought has been the emphasis upon "totality", or the absolute'—unlike the Germans? There is a Gallic 'distaste for intellectual doubt, uncertainty or scepticism'—Descartes?³³

Past Imperfect's main argument, tirelessly reiterated, was that French left-wing intellectuals in this period lacked 'any common ideal of justice'—although Judt also remarked at one point that there was no 'consensus about justice' in France as a whole, either; and indeed offered no conceptualization of his own.³⁴ The result of this moral vacuum, he concluded, was to undermine French liberalism itself:

³² *Past Imperfect*, p. 10.

³³ *Past Imperfect*, pp. 3; 80–1; 241; *Marxism and the French Left*, p. 174.

³⁴ *Past Imperfect*, pp. 74; 145–6.

What was missing, then, in the political language of contemporary France were the central premises, the building blocks of a liberal political vision . . . Quite absent was the liberal assumption of a necessary and desirable space between the individual and the collective, the private and the public, society and the state.³⁵

By any measure Tocqueville, Constant and Guizot would appear rather substantial French liberal ‘building blocks’, constituting a richer tradition than that of nineteenth-century Britain, which produced little more than Mill. But it was the absence of a liberal ‘political vision’, not a theoretical tradition, that Judt was lamenting. Like the French left, liberalism in the Hexagon had also unfortunately ‘historicized’ the moral idea of rights, by relating them to 1789. In sum, French liberals failed to grasp that liberalism is ‘not about some sort of liberal project for society: it is about a society in which the messiness and openness of politics precludes the application of large-scale projects, however rational and ideal.’³⁶ The ‘generalized moral project’ that Judt had extolled seven years before, in *Marxism and the French Left*—‘a project of an essentially indeterminate and partial kind’—was unceremoniously abandoned in *Past Imperfect*. Projects were now out; only the moral ‘vision’ was now of value.³⁷ (Indeed Judt appeared at this stage to have abandoned social democracy as well, preferring to speak of a more inclusive ‘liberalism’.)

The intellectual configuration in France in the early 1990s was, of course, the very opposite of Judt’s representation of it. The liberalism of Furet and company was unquestionably the hegemonic ideology of the period. In a ludicrous inversion, Judt depicted it as the lonely, marginal thinking of a tiny minority, allowing him to offer his own thoroughly conventional book as a—tacitly, brave—contribution to heterodoxy, along with theirs.³⁸ But politically, *Past Imperfect* suggested that, just as, even after Mitterrand, French social democracy could never quite come up to British or Nordic standards, so French liberals were ‘unable to commit themselves to the utilitarian or ethical individualism of their British contemporaries’ in the nineteenth century, and even today ‘few thinkers in France have so far undertaken to construct a moral vocabulary for liberal

³⁵ *Past Imperfect*, p. 241.

³⁶ *Past Imperfect*, pp. 235–9; 240; 315.

³⁷ *Marxism and the French Left*, p. 298; *Past Imperfect*, p. 315.

³⁸ *Past Imperfect*, p. 315, fn 33.

politics, an ethics, so to speak, of democracy.³⁹ Even with the PCF banished to the fringes, France remained insufficiently Anglo-Saxon.

Pantheon

Judt's next book returned to the subject of French intellectuals, this time focused not on his villains, but on his heroes. *The Burden of Responsibility: Blum, Camus, Aron and the French Twentieth Century* appeared in 1998, dedicated, appropriately enough, to the memory of François Furet. Once again, Judt paid little attention to his subjects' ideas: according to *Burden of Responsibility*, Blum made no contribution to socialist theory, Camus was unpolitical, Aron overvalued philosophy.⁴⁰ Judt explained that this was a study of political 'responsibility', in contrast to the analysis of political 'irresponsibility' in his previous book. His three exemplars, Blum, Camus and Aron, stood out against the three 'intersecting forms of irresponsibility'—political, moral and intellectual—that 'shaped French public life from the end of the First World War until the middle of the 1970s'. Indeed the irresponsibility of French intellectuals had expanded considerably since *Past Imperfect*, when they had at least, according to Judt, seen themselves as responsible to history, if not to other people.⁴¹ But what did the two contrasting terms actually mean? *The Burden of Responsibility* provides a distinctly unhelpful tautology, defining 'irresponsibility' as 'the propensity in various spheres of public life to neglect or abandon intellectual, moral or political responsibility'. Judt clarifies: 'In addition to the qualities of courage and integrity, Blum, Aron, and Camus have something else in common. They were all anti-Communists.'⁴² As the *New York Times* reviewer of *Past Imperfect* had laconically remarked, Judt's idea of a responsible intellectual was simply one whose views he found sympathetic.⁴³

³⁹ *Past Imperfect*, pp. 240; 316.

⁴⁰ Judt, *The Burden of Responsibility: Blum, Camus, Aron and the French Twentieth Century*, Chicago 1998, pp. 53; 104; 170–2.

⁴¹ *Past Imperfect*, pp. 22; 121.

⁴² *Burden of Responsibility*, pp. 20; 22.

⁴³ NYT, 10 January 1993; see John Sturrock, *The Word from Paris*, London 1998, p. 12. In addition to their anti-Communism, Blum and Aron were commended for their Zionism and Anglophilia. Blum's betrayal of the Spanish Republic was waved away, since 'he was truly constrained' by Britain, of whose system of government he was a 'fervent admirer'. Aron's occasional weakness for Gallic philosophical pretensions was redeemed by his commitment to the 'English or Anglo-American school of thought' about politics: *Burden of Responsibility*, pp. 47; 145–7.

If Judt had no difficulty establishing the ‘absolute clarity on the Communist question’ of his trio, he systematically downplayed their complicity with imperialism.⁴⁴ Yet Blum’s first act, as a *chef de cabinet* in the 1914 *Union Sacrée* government, was to betray the Socialists’ solemn pre-war promise not to participate in the mutual slaughter of the Great War. In 1925, at the height of the Rif colonial war, he informed the Assembly that there was ‘not only a right, but a duty for what are known as the superior races to draw towards themselves the races which have not attained the same degree of culture and civilisation’. Becoming Prime Minister again in December 1945, four weeks after the bombardment of Haiphong that launched the French war in Indochina, he explained that the colonial mission of France was ‘not yet accomplished’. Camus, who said virtually nothing about the war in Indochina, was dismissed even by Aron as no more than ‘a well-intentioned colonizer’ in Algeria.⁴⁵ Both Camus and Aron approved the Anglo-French-Israeli aggression against Egypt in 1956, Aron warning of the ‘Führer on the Nile’ and Camus of the menace of Soviet-backed ‘Arab imperialism’. Aron himself backed both the French and the American wars in Indochina, and objected to the French war in Algeria not on ethical grounds but because the French civilizing mission, however laudable in itself, ‘would be unsustainably expensive’.⁴⁶ When asked why he never spoke out against French torture in Algeria, Aron replied that he had never known anyone speak in favour of torture, so what was the point? Judt appears to be perfectly satisfied with this example of moral responsibility, whose logic is that the subject need never have been mentioned.

An allusion to Weber’s classic discussion of the ethics of responsibility illustrated Judt’s tenuous grasp of the complex issues raised by this highly charged term. The ‘Weberian calculus’, as he glossed it, entailed ‘the sense that we can behave responsibly without making partisan commitments—or else that a partisan engagement may under

⁴⁴ Opposition to the Algerian War had already been reduced to little more than an ‘adventure’ for the intelligentsia in *Past Imperfect*, where anti-colonialism was accused of simplifying a complex matter, presenting it as a ‘straightforward moral choice’: *Past Imperfect*, pp. 287; 283. But this is precisely what Judt demanded with regard to state socialism.

⁴⁵ *Burden of Responsibility*, p. 95.

⁴⁶ *Burden of Responsibility*, p. 166. Judt had calmly written elsewhere of Camus’s ‘rejection of violence’: ‘Albert Camus: “The best man in France”’, *NYRB*, 6 October 1994.

certain circumstances be the responsible option'.⁴⁷ Weber's actual view was rather different. For the great sociologist, the ethic of responsibility was embodied by the political actor who took responsibility for the use of 'legitimate violence'. He warned, in 'Politics as a Vocation', that 'Whomsoever contracts with violent means—and every politician does—is exposed to its specific consequences.' Ultimately, the political figure faced a choice between one way of using violence and another, without an adequate standard for discriminating between them; to act politically, then, required an absolute belief in the rightness of one's own cause, in order to transcend the chasm between political ends and means. An ethic of conviction and an ethic of responsibility were not 'absolute contrasts, but rather supplements'.⁴⁸ Indeed, Weber's concept of political responsibility here was not far from Sartre's view, a fact that Judt naturally does not confront. As Sartre put the point, in his long essay in *Les Temps modernes* following the Hungarian revolution:

In the worst case, the assumption of a moral position disguises the operation of a politician; in the best it does not affect the facts and the moralist misses the point. But politics, of whatever sort, is an action undertaken in common with certain men against other men.⁴⁹

Both Sartre and Weber refused the comfortable stance of the moralizer because they were aware of the tension between ethics and politics, and did not try to obscure it with high-sounding bromides.

3. EUROPE

By the mid-90s the *New York Review of Books* was offering Judt a more prominent platform, as publicist and commentator, than scholarly work could provide. After his first appearance there in August 1993, reviewing a work on the fate of French Jews under the Vichy regime, Judt became a regular fixture, contributing three or four pieces a year over the next decade. Eventually he would rival, or even overtake, Garton Ash and Buruma in his frequency as a quasi-editorialist, pronouncing not just on France but on Eastern Europe, the lessons of the Cold War and the fate of the West in general. The year 1993 also saw his

⁴⁷ *Burden of Responsibility*, p. 145.

⁴⁸ From *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, Hans Gerth, ed., Oxford 1958.

⁴⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations VII*, Paris, 1965, p. 147.

first contribution to *The New Republic*: an attack on Althusser, ‘the Paris strangler’. He would soon join the magazine’s editorial board.⁵⁰ The posture Judt had developed in the course of his assaults on the French left—tailing-ending the liberal-establishment vanguard, while portraying himself as a courageous exception, a lone moral voice—served him well within this wider field. In 1995–96, as Clinton and Albright elbowed aside Kohl and Mitterrand to knock ex-Yugoslav heads together, Judt lamented the failure of European leadership. In 1997, as the prophets of the Third Way took up residence in Downing Street, he called for a new social-liberal agenda. He lauded Blair’s ‘firm and honourable stand’ on Kosovo and endorsed the Oslo Accords on Palestine.⁵¹ In *The New Republic* he contributed to a 1997 ‘Zionism at 100’ symposium—arguing that Zionism should not be seen as an ethno-nationalist movement, but a universalist-enlightenment one—and attacked Peter Novick’s critique of the instrumentalization of the Judeocide in *The Holocaust in American Life*.⁵²

In 2008 Judt would publish a selection of these writings in *Reappraisals*, appointing himself as a memorializer to the contemporary world on the lessons of ‘the forgotten twentieth century’; such overlooked themes as vigilance against Communism and Holocaust recognition taking pride of place. In his Introduction, Judt regretted that the term ‘intellectual’ had come to evoke a ‘narrow band of left-leaning “progressives”’, with Sartre at their head, rather than his own pantheon: Camus, Koestler and Kołakowski. Judt’s paeon to the last, in keeping with his general approach to the history of ideas, managed to avoid any mention of Kołakowski’s religious conversion, inconvenient for Judt as a sharp critic of Woytila.⁵³

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Judt’s historical research took a back seat during this period. His only book between 1993 and 2005 was a slender

⁵⁰ Anti-Communism continued to be a salient theme: ‘it was the palpably malign quality of the Great Socialist Experiment’, Judt opined, that ‘made it so irresistible to men and women of goodwill in search of a Cause’. Judt, ‘The Information’, *TNR*, 4 November 2002.

⁵¹ Judt, ‘Europe: The Grand Illusion’, *NYRB*, 11 July 1996; ‘The Social Question Redivivus’, *Foreign Affairs*, Sept–Oct 1997; ‘The Gnome in the Garden’, *NYRB*, 19 July 2001.

⁵² Judt, ‘Zionism at 100’, *TNR*, 8 September 1997; ‘The Morbid Truth’, *TNR*, 19 July 1999.

⁵³ Judt, *Reappraisals*, p. 129.

volume containing three lectures, two of them already published in the NYRB, which appeared as *A Grand Illusion? An Essay on Europe* in 1996. No rationale was provided for the switch from French socialism to the larger, more nebulous subject of 'Europe' as a historical subject. In his NYRB obituary, Timothy Snyder—demonstrating an astonishing ignorance of his colleague's actual trajectory—would suggest that it was Judt's 'midlife participation in Eastern European intellectual life, which hastened the break with Marxism [*sic*] and enabled a more capacious view of the continent.'⁵⁴ But although he liked to term himself an 'Eastern Europeanist', Judt never produced any monograph on the region; even his 1987 'A Politics of Impotence?' remained a working paper.

The political tone of *A Grand Illusion?* was distinctly Euro-pessimist: 'a truly united Europe is sufficiently unlikely for it to be unwise and self-defeating to insist on it'. The exceptionally favourable combination of circumstances that drove European integration forward up to the 1980s would not reappear:

These were unrepeatable, one-time transformations. That is to say, Western Europe will probably never again have to catch up on thirty years of economic stagnation or half a century of agrarian depression, or rebuild after a disastrous war. Nor will it be bound together by the need to do so, or by the coincidence of Communist threat and American encouragement.⁵⁵

Extension to the East could not occur on the terms granted to existing member states, since this would require huge transfer payments from Western European economies already suffering from persistent unemployment and slow growth. Long-running economic divergences between the two halves of Europe, dating back to before 1914, constituted a major obstacle to unification. Moreover, the lessons of Yugoslavia—this was written at the moment of the Dayton Accords—illustrated 'the weakness of European initiatives, the compulsion to avoid engagement and the absence of any recognized collective strategic interest beyond maintaining the status quo'. 'In its strong form', Judt concluded, 'the idea of Europe has had its day.'⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Timothy Snyder, 'On Tony Judt', NYRB, 14 October 2010. Snyder is co-author with Judt of a 'history of the life of the mind in the twentieth century', due out later this year.

⁵⁵ Judt, *A Grand Illusion? An Essay on Europe*, New York 1996, pp. viii; 33.

⁵⁶ *Grand Illusion?*, pp. 92–7; 60; 137; 128.

Cause célèbre

At the turn of the century, commentary in the *NYRB* and *New Republic* continued to claim much of Judt's time. His response to 9.11 announced that the world had crossed the threshold into a new moral-political universe. He rallied immediately behind the war in Afghanistan and organized an October 2002 conference on the central war-on-terror theme of 'global anti-Americanism'. Like millions of others, however, he was dubious about Bush and Cheney's plans for the invasion of Iraq; also about the salience of the settlers' agenda in Israeli politics. In July 2002 he wrote a piece mildly critical of 'intolerant, ultra-religious' settlers and anti-Arab *mizrahi* Israelis in *The New Republic*. The following year his *NYRB* article, 'Israel: The Alternative', created a furore in New York. As Judt would recall, 'the rabbis of Riverside' picketed a talk he was due to give at a local high school, marshalling protesters dressed as concentration-camp inmates.⁵⁷ The event says more about the thuggishness of hardline American Zionists than it does about Judt's essay, which recycled the venerable notion of a bi-national democracy for Israel–Palestine.

The Oslo process was now over, Judt declared: 'Israel continues to mock its American patron, building illegal settlements in general disregard of the "road map".' The US president had been 'reduced to a ventriloquist's dummy, pitifully reciting the Israeli cabinet's line: "It's all Arafat's fault".' Palestinian Arabs, 'corralled into bantustans', subsisted on EU handouts. Sharon, Arafat and a handful of terrorists could all 'claim victory'. Departing from his previous assertion that Zionism had been a universalist movement, he declared it a typical late-nineteenth-century ethno-nationalist one, and as such an anachronism in 'a world that has moved on, a world of individual rights, open frontiers and international law'. Given the demographic trend towards a Palestinian majority in 'greater Israel', the country would now have to choose between being a non-democratic ethno-religious state, with a growing majority of disenfranchised non-Jews, or a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic secular democracy. Israel was already 'a multi-cultural society in all but name', yet ranked its citizens according to ethno-religious criteria. Furthermore, 'Israel's behaviour has been a disaster for American foreign policy'—'Washington's unconditional support for Israel even in spite of (silent)

⁵⁷ *Prospect*, August 2010.

misgivings is the main reason why most of the world no longer credits our good faith':

It is now tacitly conceded by those in a position to know that America's reasons for going to war in Iraq were not necessarily those advertised at the time. For many in the current US Administration, a major consideration was the need to destabilize and then reconfigure the Middle East in a manner thought favourable to Israel.⁵⁸

Formerly, the existence of the state of Israel had allowed Jews to 'walk tall'. Now, however—the actual tipping-point is not specified—its behaviour left non-Israeli Jews 'exposed to criticism and vulnerable to attack for things they didn't do'—'the depressing truth is that Israel today is bad for the Jews'. The situation had corroded American domestic debate: 'Rather than think straight about the Middle East, American politicians and pundits slander our European allies when they dissent, speak glibly and irresponsibly of resurgent anti-Semitism when Israel is criticized and censoriously rebuke any public figure at home who tries to break from the consensus'—Judt apparently forgetting his own censorious rebuke of Novick a few years before. The *volte face* on Israel led to Judt's ejection from *The New Republic's* editorial board and a rabid riposte from his former friend Leon Wieseltier, its literary editor, who pointed out accurately enough that the idea of a one-state solution, far from requiring anyone to 'think the unthinkable', as Judt had written, was a notion as old as the conflict over Palestine itself.⁵⁹

Judt did not include the Israel essay in his 2008 collection *Reappraisals* and seems scarcely to have addressed the one-state solution again. But reckless neo-conservative interventionism and the crudity of right-wing American Zionism had clearly soured him on the society of which he was now a citizen. In early 2005 the NYRB published Judt's 'The Good Society: Europe vs America', which strongly favoured the former. A few months later *Postwar*, his 900-page history of Europe since 1945, appeared. The idea of writing on the 1945–89 period had apparently come to Judt in December 1989, within a month of the fall of the Berlin Wall: 'the history of post-war Europe would need to be rewritten'—in retrospect, the epoch would seem 'a post-war parenthesis, the unfinished business of a conflict that ended in 1945 but whose epilogue had lasted for another half

⁵⁸ Judt, 'Israel: The Alternative', NYRB, 23 October 2003.

⁵⁹ Wieseltier, 'Israel, Palestine and the Return of the Bi-National Fantasy', TNR, 27 October 2003.

century'.⁶⁰ In the event, *Past Imperfect, A Grand Illusion?* and book reviewing had intervened. By the time the book came to be written, Judt's view of Europe had undergone a dramatic revision.

Exemplary Europe

For the most part, *Postwar* offered a familiar narrative of the period, somewhat meandering in structure and largely focused on the West; coverage of Eastern Europe mostly functioned as a sombre counterpoint to the main melody. Opening with a survey of the state of Europe after World War Two, the book covered the onset of Cold War, the advent of western affluence and the 'social democratic moment'; the 1960s, East and West; accelerated EEC integration, as a response to 1970s economic turbulence; the new Hayekian 'realism' of the 1980s, in both Thatcherite and *miterrandiste* forms; Solidarność, Gorbachev and the fall of the Comecon regimes in 1989; German reunification, Maastricht, the break-up of Yugoslavia and EU expansion. Into this lengthy, often rather flat account, Judt inserted what he confessed was 'an avowedly personal interpretation'. Post-war Europe, he argued, had produced not just the integrated structures of the EU but a social model that stood as a moral 'beacon' to aspirant members and a 'global challenge' to the American way of life. Europe had emerged, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, as a 'paragon of the international virtues':

a community of values and a system of inter-state relations held up by Europeans and non-Europeans alike as an exemplar for all to emulate. In part this was the backwash of growing disillusion with the American alternative; but the reputation was well earned . . . Neither America nor China had a serviceable model to propose for universal emulation. In spite of the horrors of their recent past—and in large measure because of them—it was *Europeans* who were now uniquely placed to offer the world some modest advice on how to avoid repeating their own mistakes. Few would have predicted it sixty years before, but the twenty-first century might yet belong to Europe.⁶¹

Judt's argument might be read as a grand narrative for today's Eurocracy, analogous to the uplifting national tales of the early twentieth century, such as Volpe's *Italia in Cammino* or Marshall's *Our Island Story*. His aim seems to have been to produce a synthesis of his now-revived admiration

⁶⁰ Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, New York 2005, p. 2.

⁶¹ *Postwar*, pp. xiii; 7–8; 799–800.

for social democracy and his hopes for the EU as an alternative to Bush's America. The 'European social model' became the new pole of attraction for Judt's politics: more acceptable than the neo-conservative US and less *passé* than the labour movement itself. But the attempt to conflate European integration, the post-war welfare state and the record of the social-democratic parties into an exemplar for the twenty-first century ended in analytical incoherence. *Postwar* oscillated continually between the assertion that 'welfare capitalism' was non-partisan, 'truly post-ideological', and the claim that it was a quintessentially social-democratic creation. On the one hand, the welfare state was the result of a 'deep longing for normality' produced by the inter-war age of extremes and the lessons of World War Two. For the generation of 1945, 'some workable balance between political freedoms and the rational, equitable distributive function of the administrative state seemed the only sensible route out of the abyss'. This meant 'a broad consensus not to press inherited ideological or cultural divisions to the point of political polarization' and a 'de-politicized citizenry', capped by 'reform-minded' Christian Democrat parties and 'a parliamentary Left'. On the other hand, welfare capitalism was the 'distinctive vision' of social democracy, which held that 'genuine improvements in the condition of all classes could be obtained in incremental and peaceful ways'.⁶²

Judt drives home the importance of a social-democratic party to final outcomes by contrasting Scandinavia and Eastern Europe. The reason that Sweden, in particular, did not develop in the same way as 'other economically depressed societies on the European margin between the wars' was due to the Social Democrats. By renouncing 'radical dogma and revolutionary ambitions', the Swedish SAD was able to incorporate small-holding peasants and strike a deal with Swedish capital at Saltsjöbaden in 1938. More generally:

The embittered and destitute peasants of inter-war central and southern Europe formed a ready constituency for Nazis, Fascists or single-issue Agrarian populists. But the equally troubled farmers, loggers, crofters and fishermen of Europe's far north turned in growing numbers to the Social Democrats, who actively supported agrarian cooperatives . . . and thereby blurred the longstanding socialist distinctions between private production and collectivist goals, 'backward' country and 'modern' town that were so electorally disastrous in other countries.⁶³

⁶² *Postwar*, pp. 362; 83; 77; 263; 363.

⁶³ *Postwar*, pp. 364–5.

The notion of a peasant-based social democracy as the road not taken in inter-war Eastern Europe is, of course, completely unhistorical. Agriculture there was profoundly backward at the time; when popular uprisings weakened landed elites, as happened in Romania, the underlying organization of production tended to revert back to subsistence farming. The agrarian economy simply did not produce adequate surpluses for a sustained modernization drive. This was one reason for the similarity among the modernizing political movements there: liberal, fascist or Communist, all faced the basic problem of extracting sufficient surplus from the peasant sector to industrialize. The choice in Eastern Europe was never really between social democracy and Leninism, but among structurally similar modernizing regimes with different ideological labels. The situation in Scandinavia, particularly in Sweden, was entirely different: a substantial free-holder peasantry existed there, literacy was widespread and agrarian surpluses were much higher. Peasants were never 'equally troubled' in Scandinavia. In general, regional social democracy operated in such a uniquely favourable environment that it was never available as a model for export, as most of its leaders recognized.

Judt's argument in *Postwar* further oscillated between claims that the welfare state has been in serious danger since the 1970s and declarations that it was the cornerstone of the twenty-first-century European social model. The first argument, based on a decidedly sketchy political economy—not a strong suit for Judt, as *Postwar* showed—claimed that, by the early 1970s, the profit margins that had made the social-democratic class compromise possible came under threat, as the 'migration of surplus agricultural labour into productive urban industry' had ended and 'rates of productivity increase began inexorably to decline'; Keynesian stimulus policies created inflation while failing to generate growth. Furthermore, the 'white, male, employed working class', whose social-democratic parties had spearheaded the welfare state, was starting to contract. On the other hand, Judt claimed that it had survived robustly through all the ideological and political din about it. 'Economic liberalization did not signal the fall of the welfare state, nor even its terminal decline, notwithstanding the hopes of its theorists. It did, though, illustrate'—strange choice of verb—'a seismic shift in the allocation of resources and initiative from public to private sectors.'⁶⁴

⁶⁴ *Postwar*, pp. 456; 484; 558.

Postwar's paean to the European social model stood in striking contrast to the gloomy outlook of *A Grand Illusion?*, which received no mention. The two books also offered sharply different accounts of Europe's east-west divide. In 1995, Judt had disputed the notion that the division was 'an artificial creation of the Cold War, an iron curtain gratuitously and recently drawn across a single cultural space.' On the contrary, as early as the fifteenth century there had been 'an invisible line that already ran from north to south through the middle of Europe.' To extend EU membership to the ex-Communist European countries would be 'an act of charity'.⁶⁵ Without a word of explanation, *Postwar* reverses these claims: the division is entirely a creation of the Cold War; before World War Two, 'the differences between North and South, rich and poor, urban and rural, counted for more than those between East and West.' After 1945, however:

The effect of the Sovietization of Eastern Europe was to draw it steadily away from the western half of the continent. Just as Western Europe was about to enter an era of dramatic transformation and unprecedented prosperity, Eastern Europe was slipping into a coma: a winter of inertia and resignation, punctured by cycles of protest and subjugation, that would last for nearly four decades.⁶⁶

In this reading, the advance of the Soviet *glacis* had blocked the region's chance of establishing an indigenous welfare state. Judt's contrary argument in 'Politics of Impotence?'—that central Europeans were so attached to their states' welfare provisions that they might not look kindly on the restoration of capitalism—had evidently been forgotten.

Judt's encomium to the European social model is further undermined by the second, less tendentious strand of his narrative: a rather humdrum account of European integration. As a historian, Judt had little talent for bringing protagonists to life—indeed, little interest in character as such—and *Postwar* offered no fresh interpretation or archival discoveries. Yet the bare facts it presented on the transnational agreements that eventually produced the EU showed that, whatever one might say about the European social model, it was a historical theme quite independent from that of European union. None of the key stages on the path to integration had much to do with the welfare state; they were mostly the

⁶⁵ *Grand Illusion?* pp. 46–7; 130.

⁶⁶ *Postwar*, p. 195.

result of geo-political calculations and, from the late 1980s, basically neo-liberal. The 1950 Schuman Plan had allowed Germany to escape from Allied economic controls, while providing a guarantee to the French against German re-armament. As Judt himself pointed out, the European Economic Community was an attempt to open French and German markets, again for largely political reasons. The impetus towards establishing a European monetary system came from an attempt to stabilize exchange rates, after the collapse of the Bretton Woods system. The creation of the European Union, through the 1987 Single European Act and 1992 Maastricht Treaty, established the free circulation of goods, services and capital among its members but also imposed harsh German-style budgetary requirements. As *Postwar* noted, Eurozone finance ministers would be 'unable to respond to the Siren-calls of voters and politicians for easier money and increased public spending'.⁶⁷

Judt attempted to resolve this tension between the actual dynamics of European integration and his supposed European social model through some implausible rhetorical linkages—for example:

In relative terms, the so-called 'social' element in the EU budget was tiny—less than 1 percent of GNP. But from the late Eighties, the budgets of the European Community and the Union nevertheless had a distinctively redistributive quality, transferring resources from wealthy regions to poor ones and contributing to a steady reduction in the aggregate gap between rich and poor: substituting in effect, for the nationally based Social-Democratic programmes of an earlier generation.⁶⁸

This was to confuse wish with reality. Judt himself pointed out twenty pages later that regional and social inequalities in Europe had sharply increased since the 1980s: a small super-rich core now contrasted with the poorer regions of the Mediterranean zone and Eastern Europe. Rather than scaling up a welfarist model, European integration had if anything undermined it.

What of the 'social model' itself? Judt suggested that, in sharp contrast to the United States, European societies were marked by high taxes, long vacations, free healthcare, good public education and high life expectancy. But the relation between this ideal and actually existing European societies remained unclear. Mostly Judt seemed to be imagining a loose

⁶⁷ *Postwar*, pp. 305, 461, 715.

⁶⁸ *Postwar*, pp. 732.

conceptual average of Europe's rich northwest—Belgium, Denmark, Britain, Ireland, France, Germany, Norway—rather than the uneven social topography of the continent as a whole. Although they were discussed in passing in *Postwar*, the unequal societies of Europe's south and east—Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece—were never allowed to impinge on its 'social model'.⁶⁹ Nor, finally, does Judt's attempt to counter-pose a 'good' European model to a 'bad' American one stand up. As his own narrative made clear, post-war Europe was closely shaped by US interventionism; Washington took extraordinary measures to reconstruct Western Europe's economies and to provide its states with a security guarantee that removed the need to rearm. Historically, the 'European model', however specified, has never been an alternative to American hegemony, but rather a consequence of it.

4. SOCIAL DEMOCRACY?

The fragility of Judt's attempted synthesis in *Postwar* was most evident in its rapid breakdown. By the time of his last book, *Ill Fares the Land*, he had undergone another conversion in political outlook. The book originated as a valedictory lecture at NYU in 2009, given after Judt had been diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. A transcription of the lecture had been published in the NYRB, bringing a 'chorus of demands for its expansion into a little book'. The resulting political testament struck a declamatory note: 'Something is profoundly wrong with the way we live today'—'and yet we seem unable to conceive of alternatives'.⁷⁰ *Ill Fares the Land* sought to provide one, in the form of a rehabilitated social democracy. Alas for his admirers, the results contradicted or flatly reversed many of Judt's most confident pronouncements on the welfare state and social democracy in *Postwar*. The resulting confusion was amply demonstrated in his attempts to grapple with four key questions.

(i) *The welfare state—who created it?*

Judt wanted to maintain once again that the welfare state was both the product of a cross-party 'Keynesian consensus' and a historic social-democratic achievement. But whereas *Postwar* had celebrated the

⁶⁹ *Postwar*, pp. 792; 777–800.

⁷⁰ *Ill Fares the Land*, New York 2010, pp. xiv, 1–2.

superiority of Europe's social model, *Ill Fares the Land* played down any such contrast, arguing instead that Roosevelt's New Deal and Johnson's Great Society were in practice the American version of social democracy.⁷¹ The 'longing for normality' after World War Two that had explained Europeans' special predilection for state-administered welfare in *Postwar* now apparently applied to Americans as well. A continual slippage in Judt's use of the term 'social democracy' sometimes allowed it to suggest a form of Hegelian historical reason, an 'objective' purpose that escapes the 'subjective' intentions of those involved. Thus anyone who supported post-war Keynesian demand management gets promoted to the rank of 'objective' social democrat—and larded with praise—whatever his or her party label:

Not only did social democrats sustain full employment for nearly three decades, they also maintained growth rates more than competitive with those of the untrammelled market economies of the past. And on the back of these economic successes they introduced radically disjunctive social changes that came to seem, within a short span of years, quite normal. When Lyndon Johnson spoke of building a 'great society' on the basis of massive public expenditure on a variety of government-sponsored programs and agencies, few objected and fewer still thought the proposition odd.⁷²

Supporters of Eugene McCarthy—indeed, LBJ himself—might be surprised at this retrospective elevation to the status of a Yankee Olof Palme.

Similarly, while *Postwar* had given pride of place to Scandinavian and British social democracy, *Ill Fares the Land* explained that 'pure' social democracy along Scandinavian lines had always been 'non-exportable', while the welfare state created by post-war British Labour was not really social democratic at all, but simply 'pragmatic'. Accompanying this was a much more pronounced emphasis on the non-radicalism of the welfare state, now not just 'post-ideological', as in *Postwar*, but the creation of 'instinctive conservatives'.⁷³ By Judt's criteria, indeed, Berlusconi, Sarkozy and Merkel might count as social democrats:

Social democracy, in one form or another, is the prose of contemporary European politics. There are very few European politicians, and fewer still in positions of influence, who would dissent from core social democratic assumptions about the duties of the state, however much they might differ as to their scope.⁷⁴

⁷¹ *Ill Fares the Land*, p. 32.

⁷³ *Ill Fares the Land*, pp. 69; 51; 46.

⁷² *Ill Fares the Land*, p. 79.

⁷⁴ *Ill Fares the Land*, p. 143.

The conceptual muddiness of this approach, in which virtually all political actors become the unwitting instruments of a social-democratic *Geist*, succeeds only in obscuring the central political and historical issues: what was the actual role of social-democratic parties in the construction of the welfare state, and what part was played by broader political-economic conditions? These were questions that Judt never even posed. Two essential components to any answer might be stressed, though: firstly, the long economic boom of the post-war period, which has little if any linkage to the strength of social-democratic parties but whose arc tracks the expansion of welfarism very closely. Secondly, the existence of a rival Communist bloc, proclaiming itself the homeland of the workers. The conversion of social-democratic parties into neo-liberal centre lefts followed the decline and fall of the state-socialist challenge. Judt, the life-long anti-Communist, at one point lets this slip himself:

That is why the fall of Communism mattered so much. With its collapse, there unravelled the whole skein of doctrines that had bound the Left together for over a century. However perverted the Muscovite variation, its sudden and complete disappearance could not but have a disruptive impact on any party or movement calling itself 'social democratic' . . . for the Left, the absence of a historically buttressed narrative leaves an empty space.⁷⁵

However one defines the relationship, empirically it seems clear that social democracy has been deeply dependent on its revolutionary twin. The attempt to formulate a social-democratic politics in the absence of a socialist one would seem historically implausible.

(ii) *The welfare state—what went wrong?*

Without explanation, the boosterism of *Postwar*, in which the European social model had been a beacon to the world, turned to cassandricism in *Ill Fares the Land*, which saw the welfare state as disastrously eroded by rising inequality and declining public services. Judt focused chiefly on the US and UK, but made clear that not even Sweden, France, Germany or the Netherlands had been exempt from negative developments.⁷⁶ What explained this deterioration? Principally, Judt argued, it was the fault of the generation that had grown up under the post-war welfare state and had taken the security it gave them for granted, becoming disaffected instead of grateful: 'the narcissism of the student movements,

⁷⁵ *Ill Fares the Land*, p. 142.

⁷⁶ *Ill Fares the Land*, pp. 113; 234.

new Left ideologues and the popular culture of the 60s generation invited a conservative backlash', allowing the Right to roll forward the 'intellectual revolution' mounted by Hayek and Friedman, imposing a free-market dogmatics on the political scene—an outcome that was 'far from inevitable'.⁷⁷

For Judt, the crisis of the welfare state was therefore largely a matter of ideas—selfish ones on the part of the 60s radicals, and counter-arguments that were 'forceful indeed' from the Hayekians.⁷⁸ If things had been otherwise, the post-war consensus would presumably still be intact. What was striking was the complete absence of any economic explanation of the crisis in the 'Keynesian consensus' around Judt's welfare state. Where economic changes received any mention, it was always as an aside. Thus: 'As the post-war boom wound down'—no explanation of why it did so—unemployment rose and the tax-base of the state was threatened. Or: 'Only when the welfare state began to run into difficulties'—unexplained—did neo-liberal ideas take hold. Or: 'The growth in unemployment over the course of the 1970s' and 'the inflation of those years'—unexplained—put new strains on the exchequer.⁷⁹ Although the crisis of welfarism was the central topic in *Ill Fares the Land*, there was even less material explanation of it than in *Postwar*.

(iii) *Social Democracy: success or failure?*

Overlapping with Judt's account of welfarism was his depiction of the fate of social democracy, tacitly understood as parties of the Socialist International. Were they the vehicle for a renewed welfare state? Judt mentioned in passing a variety of partly contradictory causes for their 'loss of nerve': a shrinking working class; the fall of Communism; the fact that social democracy 'in one form or another' had become so generalized—'the prose of contemporary European politics', as above—that the parties themselves now had little distinctive to offer.⁸⁰ But Judt could not afford to let such gloomy reflections go too far, lest they undermine the purpose of his book—a ringing call to revive social democracy as the last best hope of the age. The resulting sermon contradicted itself at every step. Thus, by the end of the twentieth century, social democracy had not

⁷⁷ *Ill Fares the Land*, pp. 83–4; 94–6.

⁷⁸ *Ill Fares the Land*, p. 97.

⁷⁹ *Ill Fares the Land*, pp. 79; 102; 147.

⁸⁰ *Ill Fares the Land*, pp. 86; 151; 143–4.

merely 'fulfilled many of its long-standing objectives', but 'succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of its founders'—though presumably Judt was not here referring to Marx, Engels, Bebel, Bernstein. Yet in that case, why was the land faring so ill? Or again: a 'defensive stance made sense' for social democracy, to 'convince voters that it was a respectable radical choice within a liberal polity'. Yet 'social democracy cannot just be about preserving worthy institutions as a defence against worse options'.⁸¹

(iv) *What is to be done?*

Success or failure, however, for the moment social democracy had 'lost its way'. What was needed to put it back on the right track? Judt's answer was a *ne plus ultra* of vapid idealism: it was a better kind of language that would change the world. For the problem of contemporary social democracy was 'not what to do' [*sic*] but 'how to talk about it'—'our disability is *discursive*: we simply do not know how to talk about these things any more'. *Ill Fares the Land* harped on this theme from the start, as Judt pondered how to answer a twelve-year-old who had warned him that the word 'socialism' was toxic in the US; Judt's solution was to tell the boy to forget 'socialism' and think instead of 'social democracy', with its wholesome 'acceptance of capitalism'.⁸²

A 'new language of politics' was, of course, the thesis of Furet's *Rethinking the French Revolution*, in which society more or less levitated by the sheer magic of words. But Judt gave a characteristically British twist to this French conception: the discourse that would rescue social democracy was a 'moral narrative', though Judt did not explain what such a narrative might say. Combined with this was a call to rehabilitate the state, as 'the only institution standing between individuals and non-state actors like banks or international corporations'—though since Judt did not specify what the state should do, the effect was little more than rhetorical.⁸³ Judt was, of course, very ill at the time. Nevertheless, it boggles the mind to think that a serious observer of current affairs living in the United States could in 2010 describe the 'state' as a neutral third party, standing between banks and individuals. This was the political order that socialized the massive bank losses of 2008 against widespread popular rage. The discontinuity of style and personnel between Bush and Obama

⁸¹ *Ill Fares the Land*, pp. 147; 229; 143; 233.

⁸² *Ill Fares the Land*, pp. 6; 161; 234; 34; 229.

⁸³ *Ill Fares the Land*, p. 196; 183.

has only underscored the fundamental continuity of state policy toward the banks. *Ill Fares the Land* concluded with a desperately bland set of political prescriptions. ‘Incremental improvements upon unsatisfactory circumstances are the best we can hope for, and all we should seek.’⁸⁴ With full allowance made for the conditions in which he was working at this stage—the nightmare of his advancing paralysis vividly described in the pages of the NYRB⁸⁵—in Judt’s final testament, neo-social democracy remains remarkably insipid.

Assessment

How do the accolades for Judt as a ‘great historian’, ‘fearless critic’ and ‘brilliant political commentator’ stand up against a cool examination of his work? As historiography, even his earliest, most substantial scholarly works on France—*Reconstruction of the Socialist Party* and *Socialism in Provence*—were weakened by the aggressive tendentiousness of his approach. *Marxism and the French Left* and *Past Imperfect* were avowedly selective and polemical. Judt lacked the most basic requirement for any student of intellectual history: the ability to grasp and reconstruct an idea with philological precision. His lack of interest in ideas is borne out *in extenso* throughout his copious writings on intellectuals: there were never any serious attempts to reconstruct a thinker’s position, so as to probe and question it. Even summaries of figures to whom he was well-disposed were slapdash; writers to whom he was hostile were regularly excoriated for views they did not hold. Judged as an intellectual historian, the verdict on Judt must be negative. His magnum opus, *Postwar*, is regularly listed for undergraduate European History courses. But its 900 pages produced little new by way of evidence or interpretation—a weakness underlined by the absence of even the most minimal scholarly apparatus, beyond a ‘general bibliography’ available from NYU.

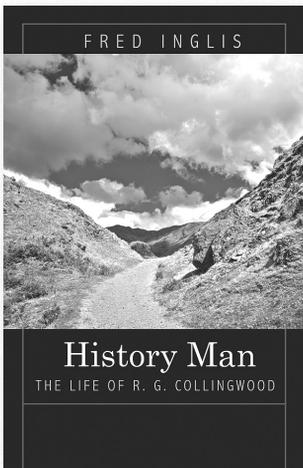
Judt himself confessed in his final interview that at school he had been considered ‘better at literature than history’; also bragging, ‘I was—and knew I was—among the best speakers and writers of my age cohort. I don’t mean I was the best historian’.⁸⁶ In effect, it was his talent, limited but real, as a polemicist and a pamphleteer that disqualified Judt

⁸⁴ *Ill Fares the Land*, pp. 183; 224.

⁸⁵ Judt, ‘Night’, NYRB; collected, together with two dozen other short pieces, in *The Memory Chalet*.

⁸⁶ *Prospect*, August 2010.

as a historian of ideas, much as he liked to claim the loftier calling. His range as a polemicist was relatively narrow: there is a limit to what can be got from attacking the French left or lauding fellow defenders of the Free World. His negative judgements on political leaders—Thatcher, Bush, Clinton, Blair—carried little analytical heft; his belated criticism of Israel's West Bank settlements never explained at what point the Zionist project had gone wrong. Nevertheless, judged as a polemicist, the verdict can be more favourable, exonerating Judt of the heedless inconsistencies, both conceptual and analytic, that marred his work as historian of Europe and latter-day champion of neo-social democracy. A pamphleteer may be allowed—even expected—to change his views more or less at the drop of a hat. If the EU is now a moral beacon to the world, now a sad example of failed leadership; or the welfare state now the legacy of organized labour, now the common sense of capitalist politicians—so what? All grist to the mill. A historian will be held to different standards.



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