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Review - Ill fares the land

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Review - Ill fares the land

Abstract

Putting aside for a moment his wonderful autobiographical reminiscences in *The New York Review of Books*, this is Tony Judt's last major work. And it is an extended essay of immense significance. It constitutes a clarion call for the resuscitation of a genuine social democracy committed to equality and social justice. It is simultaneously an appeal to resist the fetishism of "small" government, the deification of budget surplus, the pathetic passion for privatization, the capitulation to markets whose freedom is measured purely by profits. We need, argues Judt, a commitment to the commonweal, a shared goal rather than one divided into special interests and identities, a public sphere that is vibrant and egalitarian.

**Tony Judt, *Ill Fares the Land*, The
Penguin Press, New York, 2010, 237pp.**

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Putting aside for a moment his wonderful autobiographical reminiscences in *The New York Review of Books*, this is Tony Judt's last major work. And it is an extended essay of immense significance. It constitutes a clarion call for the resuscitation of a genuine social democracy committed to equality and social justice. It is simultaneously an appeal to resist the fetishism of "small" government, the deification of budget surplus, the pathetic passion for privatization, the capitulation to markets whose freedom is measured purely by profits. We need, argues Judt, a commitment to the commonweal, a shared goal rather than one divided into special interests and identities, a public sphere that is vibrant and egalitarian.

Tony Judt was a remarkable historian of European society and ideas. More than that, in his last years he became an engaged public intellectual who provoked the ire of Zionists, orthodox Marxists and new Labourites (amongst others). Once a Marxist himself, he drifted to the centre of the political spectrum as a reaction to authoritarian socialism and what he saw as a bankrupt Marxism, only to end up firmly on the democratic left. I would argue that this had much to do with his growing recognition that Israel was founded upon a fundamental injustice and that it needed to be reconstituted as a democratic binational state embracing Palestinians. [1] Just as the move towards Zionism in the 1950s and 1970s helped pushed many American leftists to the right, Judt's transitions can be at least partly explained by his steady drift away from Zionism. He was a socialist Zionist in the 1960s and worked on an Israeli kibbutz. Yet he also saw himself as part of the growing leftist movement

for social change. He eventually became cynically dismissive of what he saw as the excesses of Sixties radicalism and its erstwhile intellectual heroes like Sartre. A certain conservatism underpins his historical outlook, even a moralism that sounds at times quaint yet is rarely without considered qualification. So, in reference to the 1960s, he notes: “the solipsistic conceit of the age – that the young would change the world by ‘doing their thing’, ‘letting it all hang out’ and ‘making love, not war’ – was always an illusion, and it has not worn not well”. Yet, he acknowledges, “it was not the only illusion of the time, and by no means the most foolish:” [2] A conservative disposition, to be sure, but one tempered with wry observation about the times. Moreover, we should never forget that Marx was influenced profoundly by the conservative Carlyle (he borrowed the term “cash nexus” from him) and that the left should be guided by a moral or ethical framework of reference. I would argue, perhaps unfashionably, that “make love not war” was a profoundly ethical perspective, with love standing as much for the *agape* love embraced by Martin Luther King, or the love of community, solidarity and commitment to peace and justice, as sexual love. I would also argue that Sartre’s passionate opposition to the war in Vietnam, as well as his contributions to intellectual life, deserve much more respect than Judt accords.

Judt’s disdain for elements of the radical Sixties tempts him towards caricature. His Marcuse, for example, is mostly a champion of sexual radicalism and one who is of little interest now. [3] Similarly, Eric Hobsbawm (and particularly, indeed somewhat strangely, Edward Thompson) are tainted by their association with a doctrinal Marxism that led ineluctably to Stalinism. [4] Thompson, asserts Judt, cannot be taken seriously again by anyone who has read Kolakowski’s demolition of him in the essay “My Correct Views on Everything”. [5] Such wild overstatement is both unnecessary and unusual (his remarks on Hobsbawm are much more measured, if misplaced). Characteristically, however, even in the essay praising Kolakowski’s rejection of Marxism, he acknowledges three reasons why Marxism survives. First, “Marxism is a very big idea. Its sheer epistemological cheek – its promethean commitment to understanding and explaining *everything* – appeals to those who deal in ideas..” [6] Secondly, “The Marxist project...was one

strand in the great progressive narrative of our time: it shares with classical liberalism, its antithetical historical twin, that narrative's optimistic, rationalistic account of modern society and its possibilities." The "distinctive twist" added by Marxism was the dream of a classless society, a hopeless dream but one that propelled commitment and action. [7] Finally, and most importantly in terms of this review, Marxism reached out to "the wretched of the earth". It spoke directly to the disadvantaged in ways that the free marketers and "end of history" trumpeters ignore to their peril. [8]

In the last years of his life, Tony Judt suffered from a debilitating motor neuron disease that made him bed-ridden, unable to write and only capable of speaking while also breathing regularly through a mask. Yet speak he did and at length. He began his powerful, moving and intelligent autobiographical recollections in *The New York Review of Books* by reflecting bitterly but sagely on his illness. [9] Prior to that, he had delivered a superb lecture on social democracy at New York University and it is this lecture that prompted the development of the book under review. [10] Despite weaknesses that are hangovers from his rejection of Sixties radicalism and its intellectual heavyweights, it is the strengths of this book that warrant deep consideration. He believes, peculiarly, that Sixties radicals elevated individualism over social justice. This is impressionistic dismissiveness, as anyone who knows the history of the 1960s protest movements can attest. [11] Indeed, this genuflection towards a fashionable cynicism about the Sixties can tend to deflect from his sharp observations about contemporary politics. This is a pity, as they are potent, sensible and driven by a rage that our politics has been stolen by managers and manipulators with their eyes on the very bottom line.

The early section of the book is influenced heavily by Wilkinson & Pickett's study *The Spirit Level* that highlights the great benefits of more equal societies.[12] He employs extensively their mostly valuable empirical work, yet does not consider possible weaknesses in it pointed to by David Runciman (correlations that do not necessarily always work because they are based upon averages that are dragged down dramatically by the bottom percentile of a society like America). [13] He

might well also have taken note of Runciman's suggestion that however useful some of the empirical work, it is ultimately an ethical framework that drives a commitment to equality. Judt, of course, does not lack this ethical framework and the book is propelled by passion and vision. He bemoans the loss of a world of shared commitment, commitment to the state working on behalf of the people, a loss to the wiles and fancies of profit merchants and politicians without soul. He rails against the shortsightedness of the privatisers and derugulators who have wrecked our common wealth. Here and elsewhere he writes eloquently about the absurdity of sacrificing a social service (like his beloved trains) to seekers of profit. [14] He deplores also the elevation of private space to a plane of democratic right when it actually undermines democracy:

The contemporary impulse to live in such private spaces with people like oneself is not confined to wealthy property owners. It is the same urge that drives African-Americans or Jewish students in colleges today to form separate 'houses', to eat apart and even to learn primarily about themselves by enrolling in identity study majors. But in universities, like societies at large, such self-protective undertakings not only starve their beneficiaries of access to a broader range of intellectual or public goods, they fragment and diminish the experience of everyone. [15]

It is community that inspires Judt and he might have recognized it was just such an ideal that also inspired the best of Sixties radicalism. Identity politics triumphed as the Sixties died.

There is much else that Judt subjects to a withering critique but he also holds out hope, somewhat astonishingly given his decaying condition. The hope is that we will revive a sense of social solidarity, of "fraternity": "fraternity...turns out to be the necessary condition for politics itself". [16] So like others, including this author, Judt feared that we are witnessing the death of politics, as common goals and ideals get buried under a swamp of aspirational fantasies and public relations slogans. [17] The only choice is for us to move towards equality because without that our sense of common purpose withers and dies. In the end, and almost paradoxically, he pines for the radical spirit of the Sixties, saddened as he is by the droves of

students entering business school today when once it would have seemed almost perverse. And he concludes with a call to action that reminds us he was once a Marxist. The point is, he challenges, not only to interpret the world but also to change it.

When he died in August this year, the world lost a public intellectual of great character and commitment. Those of us with a more radical bent, if bent is the right word, might not have always agreed with him but his immense output was never less than fascinating, always elegantly constructed and ultimately a profound challenge to contemporary political orthodoxy.

Notes

- 1 Tony Judt, "Israel: The Alternative", *The New York Review of Books*, October 23, 2003, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2003/oct/23/israel-the-alternative/>
- 2 Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, Penguin, New York, 2005, p. 398.
- 3 Ibid., p.404; Tony Judt, *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century*, New York, The Penguin Press, 2008, p. 132.
- 4 Judt, *Reappraisals*, pp. 116 -128 (on Hobsbawm), pp. 135–6 (on Thompson).
- 5 Ibid., p.136. Thompson had attacked Kolakowski in an open letter in *The Socialist Register* for his abandonment of Marxism when he had served as an exemplary eastern European dissident Marxist philosopher.
- 6 Ibid, p. 138. (his emphasis)
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid., pp. 139–40.
- 9 Tony Judt, "Night", *New York Review of Books*, January 14, 2010, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/jan/14/night/>
- 10 Tony Judt, "What is Living and What is dead in Social Democracy" *The New York Review of Books*, December 17, 2009, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2009/dec/17/what-is-living-and-what-is-dead-in-social-democracy>
- 11 Judt, *Ill Fares the Land*, pp. 87–8. Jenny Diski's racy essay on the Sixties shares some of this mistaken interpretation: Jenny Diski, *The Sixties*, Picador, New York, 2009.
- 12 Richard Wilkinson & Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why More*

Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better, Allen Lane, London, 2009.

- 13 David Runciman, "How messy it all is", *London Review of Books*, October 22, 2009, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n20/david-runciman/how-messy-it-all-is>
- 14 Judt, *Ill Fares the Land*, pp. 207ff.; Judt, *Reappraisals*, pp.225-7.
- 15 Judt, *Ill Fares the Land*, pp. 128-9.
- 16 Judt, *Ill Fares the Land*, p. 185.
- 17 Anthony Ashbolt, "Death, Decline or Atrophy? The Necessity of Poltics", in Tom Battin (ed.), *A Passion for Politics: Essays in Honour of Graham Maddox*, Pearson Education Australia, Frenchs Forest, 2005, pp. 1-13. For a stinging critique of "aspirational politics", see Stefan Collini, "Blahspeak", *London Review of Books*, April 8, 2010, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n07/stefan-collini/blahspeak>