

Judgment, Understanding, and Tony Judt

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I did not know Tony Judt very well, but I felt I knew him all the same. One reason for this may strike some readers of this forum as unsuitably personal: The progressive neurological disease that claimed Tony's life bore a very strong resemblance to the illness that claimed my father. When I saw Tony in his last public address at NYU—on “What is Living and What is Dead in Democratic Socialism?” (in the autumn of 2009) he was confined to a chair and had lost the use of his hands. For his breath and speech he relied on the bursts of air given to him through a mask that was connected to a mechanical pump; its regular expulsions of air punctuated his sentences. I imagine that for anyone in the assembly hall that afternoon, it was not only what Tony said that mattered but the fact that he could say it at all. But for me the event had a special poignancy, since I had only recently watched my father fall victim to a similar illness. The causes were different, but the symptomology was the same: What started with an involuntary switch in his finger ultimately confined my father to a hospital bed in which he lay in a state of near-total paralysis. The disease claimed him swiftly, after just four years from diagnosis to death. My father was a professor and pioneer in plant genetics, and even though I was an admiring son I was not drawn to the sciences. I became a historian. I remember that at the end of Tony's masterful speech on the history and future of socialism in Europe and America a youthful voice posed a question from the floor: What should be said to school friends who use the term “socialist” only to criticize the current President and without knowledge of its true meaning? Tony proudly introduced the questioner, his son Nicholas. Impressed by the exchange, I sat quietly, remembering my own father.

I mention all of this because such memories make it especially difficult for me to raise any doubts about Tony's achievements. Overall, it seems to me, those achievements are immense. This past semester I taught a course on European history, literature, and film since 1945, and Tony's *Postwar* was a required text. The accumulated essays from *The New York Review of Books*, including the personal memories and historical portraits that have been collected in *The Memory Chalet*, are simply irreplaceable. But as an intellectual historian I must confess that one of Tony's earlier books—*Past Imperfect*—remains an achievement that is difficult to praise. When I read the assessments by my colleagues, Julian Bourg and Ethan Kleinberg, along with the thoughtful essays by Judith Friedlander and Robert Zaretsky, I find further confirmation of what I already knew: *Past Imperfect* was far from perfect, and it was certainly not Tony's best.

My misgivings, it seems, were not unique. Inevitably, the book aroused strong emotions, and most of them were negative.

I belong to the peculiar discipline-that-is-not-a-discipline that is intellectual history. Some of us who were drawn to this area of scholarship felt that it offered a respite from the ethic of overspecialization that has seized so much of the academy. Some of us also felt that it was a sphere of scholarship in which it is still permissible to believe that ideas matter, and not because they are sociological marks of persona or prestige, and not because they are instruments of ideological suasion, but simply because thought as such is a vital part of being human. This kind of belief drew some of my friends to departments of philosophy or political theory. But, perhaps due to a certain skepticism in my temperament, I have never been able to sustain the requisite confidence that in any argument there is one side that is ultimately right. What appeals to me most of all is the adventure of argumentation itself rather than the promise of an airtight solution.

This brings me to Tony Judt's *Past Imperfect*. What makes the book so memorable is also what has long aroused my frustration: its stringent moralism, and the vigor with which it prosecutes its case. Not surprisingly, this is the very same factor that made Judt so gifted an historian and so formidable as a public critic. A political essayist can afford to give free rein to personal opinion; he is in fact expected to do so. But different genres impose different rules. A historian is required to sustain (or at least to make a pretense of sustaining) a proper balance between judgment and understanding. The chief difficulty with *Past Imperfect* is that it does not even make a pretense of honoring this ideal. It is a book overpowered by its own moral certitude.

I am ready to concede that some of my regrets about the book may be due to a difference of generations. Although my heart is stirred by Marxism as a theoretical tradition, it is a passion altogether removed from political history. I am far too young to have ever felt any enthusiasm for real existing Communism. I studied Russian in college in the mid 1980s, during the era when the Reagan administration was making a nostalgic bid to revive the faded rhetoric of the Cold War. But I couldn't take seriously the ideologies of either side. When I spent a summer in the Soviet Union and met with refusniks, I learned very quickly to despise just about everything about the governments of the Eastern bloc and especially their ideological bluster. I was trailed occasionally by a man who, I presume, was KGB, but he was there chiefly to let me know he was there. It was 1986, and he was as apathetic as the government he represented. The people to whom I brought gifts and letters were oppressed, victims of a state-sanctioned anti-Semitism that was only partly hidden by the awkward and dilapidated rhetoric of official Marxism. But by that time nobody believed the rhetoric if they ever had.

Altogether different was Tony Judt's encounter with Marxism. A student at Cambridge in the 1960s, he was only twenty years old in 1968 and only 22 when he studied at the Ecole Normale Supérieure. His memories of his year are (in Judith Friedlander's phrase) "disparaging and angry." I wonder about that year and what might have happened that left Judt so embittered. When I read *Past Imperfect* I have the definite impression that he is indicting not only Sartre and Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir but also their acolytes and epigones twenty years on. One imagines some primal wound, an encounter with a disdainful *normalien*, perhaps, who became in Judt's memory the paradigm for everything that was rotten in Paris.

From my own generational perspective, however, this was a battle long concluded. I grew up already knowing that Stalin was little more than a dictator, and that there was no such thing as a dialectical justification for the gulag. It is not that I ever disagreed with these judgments; it is that I found them so obvious they struck me as supererogatory. By the time I was a student of intellectual history, the coterie of postwar French intellectuals who developed erudite apologies for Soviet atrocity had already lost whatever appeal it may have once held for some of Judt's contemporaries. But it would be wrong to see Judt as a disenchanting child of the 1960s. He was something more conflicted, and his work was more conflicted as well. *Past Imperfect* is a somewhat angry book, but it is also a dismissive one. Its manner of argumentation is less historical than polemical chiefly because it permits knowledge of the present to drive its understanding of the past. Judt identifies the book not as history but as "an essay in moral responsibility." The book applies itself to the business of political demolition but concludes by noting that today little remains of the tradition it has demolished. But the question then arises: Why and to what end the vigor of its judgment?

Animating Tony Judt's work on French Marxism (in *Past Imperfect* but also in his earlier book, *Marxism and the French Left*) was a deeply felt awareness of the immense suffering visited upon millions of people throughout the Eastern bloc because of the pursuit of Marxist ideal. Behind the anger was moral outrage, and rightly so. But the outrage was directed not primarily at the depredations of Stalinism itself but instead at intellectuals in the West who had the freedom, though they lacked the moral compass, to register those crimes as what they were. As Raymond Aron observed in 1950, it was a "ludicrous surprise...that the European left had taken a pyramid-builder for its God."

The difficulty with moral outrage, however, is that even when it is justified it easily becomes a temptation to moral simplification. Moral judgment sometimes *does* pose a stark choice between right and wrong, but it should be the task of the historian to delay (not suspend) judgment in the interests of historical understanding. Historical understanding does not preclude political judgment, but Tony seemed so eager to judge that he did not pause—or, at least, he did not pause long enough—to understand why Sartre and his peers might have found Communism so appealing. Ironically, in the very tonality of its phrasing and the sheer vigor of its political judgments *Past Imperfect* bears an unfortunate resemblance to the take-no-prisoners style of political polemic that was commonplace among the French intellectuals the book seeks to condemn. The explanations Tony does provide for their behavior are too external: they are mostly political but rarely conceptual. They bypass the intellectual deliberation and (as Ethan Kleinberg says) the actual arguments born from philosophy and political theory that encouraged Sartre and his allies to see in Soviet Communism an end to the riddles of history. It is one of the purposes of intellectual history that it should revive for the reader a sense of the inner life of past ideas. *Past Imperfect* is a bracing polemic about intellectuals, but I am not certain it ranks as a genuine work of intellectual history according to this definition: it is too impatient with the ideas themselves.

Tony Judt had a capacious intellect and an equally capacious humanity; there was very little in history about which he could remain indifferent. But he was chiefly a political historian, and the ideas that aroused his interest were mostly political ideas. About the more abstract concerns of philosophers and metaphysicians he was noticeably indifferent. This was true in *Past Imperfect* and remained true in *Postwar*, in which the most insightful passages on politics are followed by deflationary verdicts on intellectual movements to which he probably devoted

little study. If the political failings of Sartre and Company roused Judt to righteous anger, the constellation of theorists and philosophers loosely grouped under the term “post-structuralism” hardly seemed deserving of serious consideration. In the chapter on the culture of the 1970s, “Diminished Expectations,” Judt rehearsed what are little more than the standard clichés about post-structuralism, e.g., that “‘Difficulty’ became the meaning of intellectual seriousness.” Even more unfortunate was that he permitted the polemical anti-philosophers Luc Ferry and Alain Renault to have the last word, with their remark that “the greatest achievement of the thinkers of the Sixties was to convince their audience that incomprehensibility was the sign of greatness.”

Incomprehensibility to whom? Surely not to the intellectuals themselves. And was difficulty their special distinction? (Did Judt devote himself to reading Hegel or Husserl, two earlier paragons of difficulty? Is Maimonides *easy*?) In a popular and otherwise brilliantly argued work of synthetic history such as *Postwar*, the risk in such passing commentary is considerable, since it confirms, for a readership that may not know otherwise, that certain philosophical traditions or debates are simply vacuous and aren’t worth the trouble. It is significant that “incomprehensibility” or “difficulty” are both labels that serve to commemorate one’s initial encounter with ideas and not the lessons they may yield only after strenuous effort. The implication is that certain intellectual movements are like Potemkin villages—mere displays along the road, and pathetic displays at that. I do not know what to make of such passages in Judt’s writing because they occur with some frequency in the midst of prose that is in so many other respects a testament to the author’s powers of insight.

If Judt did not incline by nature toward certain intellectual or philosophical fashions this seems to me ultimately a minor failing. And if his political judgments concerning the apologists for Communism must strike some readers as intemperate this seems to me a failing we should also forgive when we consider the crimes in question: Better to be wrong with Judt than right with Sartre. Sometimes the historians’ shibboleth of “understanding” is taken to imply a complete abstention from moral judgment. But this strikes me as an amputated and anemic conception of the historian’s craft.

Nor should we misconstrue the political convictions of the author. It is important, I think, to distinguish between anti-Communism and neo-liberalism. Here I disagree with Julian Bourg, whose essay is in all other respects deeply impressive: Was Tony Judt a neo-liberal or did *Past Imperfect* move in this direction? This seems to me a misunderstanding of his political commitments. Anti-Stalinism even of the most vigorous kind surely does not imply neo-liberalism. Ultimately what drove Judt’s polemic, I think, was not a disillusionment with state-planning or a happy endorsement of capitalism deregulated. Judt was not a neo-liberal; he was a social-democrat. This helps us to explain why *The Burden of Responsibility* could contain within its covers not just a homage to Raymond Aron but also, alongside Camus, a eulogy for Léon Blum.

We should recall that the socialist Blum was first isolated and ultimately overtaken by the crude polarities of his time. Blum was an “outsider,” but he was also—and this is the final line of the essay—“a great Frenchman.” In most of his writing Judt is an ironist, a master of the grim understatement. How often did he permit himself a phrase of such uninhibited acclaim?

Notwithstanding his fidelity to the ideal of social democracy Judt was largely disabused of hope for its future. All of his later writings, from *Past Imperfect* to *Postwar* to *Ill Fares the Land* (the published version of his valedictory lecture at NYU), seem to me animated by the same critical but ultimately tragic spirit. In the end, I suspect that what most angered Tony about the French Marxist intellectuals was that they betrayed the more humane vision of socialism he admired at a moment when its realization was a real possibility. That Tony Judt concluded his career with a public homage to this ideal seems to me the only ending proper to so remarkable a man.

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