

Tony Judt, Historian

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Offering both eloquent praise and considered criticism, the contributors to this roundtable on *Past Imperfect* and *The Burden of Intellectuals* have paid a remarkable tribute to Tony Judt's scholarship and legacy. Julian Bourq and Ethan Kleinberg, two intellectual historians, acknowledge their admiration for Judt's rhetorical verve and *Past Imperfect's* influence on their own writing but also express significant disagreements with the book's engagement with ideas and philosophy. Judith Friedlander and Robert Zaretsky find for their part much to commend, despite several reservations, in Tony Judt's assault on postwar fellow-travelers and in his resurrection of three "outsiders"—Blum, Camus and Aron—as ideal-types of ethical intellectuals. *Past Imperfect*, Robert Zaretsky writes, "remains exemplary and essential" while the three "relaxed and curious" essays constituting *The Burden of Responsibility* aptly reflect on "the complexities of their subjects." Tony Judt was indeed more interested in public intellectuals and their relation to politics than in thinkers *per se*, let alone French theorists and philosophers who came to age in the 1960s and after. Although cognizant of the trajectory of Hegelianism, Marxism, Existentialism, and Christian-humanism in prewar and postwar France, Tony Judt was above all fascinated with the way *engagés* intellectuals applied these categories of thought to the deciphering, and more often than not misreading, of their political world. His project, deemed inquisitorial by its critics, was to put intellectuals to the test of morality. Yet contrary to what his book's title seemed to indicate, Tony Judt was less interested in exposing "imperfect" intellectuals than rescuing responsibility from the fallacies of commitment, a stance which in his mind involved the passing of moral judgments. This alone distinguished him from detached historians of successive "guerres intellectuelles" in twentieth-century France and from a sociological approach inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's "literary field" or Karl Mannheim's "intellectual generations."¹ Within this emerging historiography, *Past Imperfect* clearly stood out as a polemical essay—the kind of book, NYU graduate students were warned, no one should write before receiving tenure. But in this work Tony Judt also claimed for himself and for practitioners of contemporary history the right, and no doubt the duty, to morally evaluate the public thought and actions, indeed the politics, of historical protagonists.

¹ Pascal Ory and Jean-François Sirinelli, *Les intellectuels en France, de l'affaire Dreyfus à nos jours* (Paris: A. Colin, 1986); Christophe Charle, *Naissance des intellectuels, 1880-1900* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1990); and Jean-François Sirinelli, *Génération intellectuelle: khâgneux et normaliens dans l'entre-deux-guerres* (Paris: Fayard, 1988).

As pointed out by the contributors, Tony Judt's moralism was fraught with methodological risks: it dangerously bestowed upon the historian the role of arbitrator; retroactively imparted post-Cold War sensitivities onto the immediate postwar era; and, in its wide brush, was prone to disregard nuances and ambiguities. At times, it also caused discomfort even among sympathizers and friends. I remember one of them, a prominent French social scientist, depressed by the similarities he saw between *Past Imperfect* and Bernard-Henry Lévy *L'idéologie française*, the New Philosopher's vitriolic denunciation of pétaino-fascism in French contemporary thought. Yet nothing was further from the truth: moral judgment, in Tony Judt's writings, always derived from systematic and often astounding historical inquiry. It capped off a transparent process of historical reasoning and never served as a substitute for it. Tony Judt's moral interventionism certainly challenged the profession's good manners but should not deflect attention away from its argumentative and scholarly underpinnings. It is on this basis that his work should be judged: despite an avowed propensity to call things by their names—a youthful irreverence too often mistakenly taken for “Anglo-Saxon” righteousness—Tony Judt's sole intellectual commitment was to history, conceived as an art of elucidation and a lifeline to our political present.

Two decades have now elapsed since *Past Imperfect's* publication, and it is now time to disregard Tony Judt's “délectation pour le jeu de massacre” (to quote a dissatisfied French reviewer) and discuss instead the book's key historical arguments. The four participants in this salon have done so with great skill, yet I would like to briefly enumerate several reasons to celebrate *Past Imperfect* as a pioneering work of French and European history. This study, it is important to recall, inaugurated an original field of scholarship: the place of East-Central Europe in the French public mind. It is now commonplace to relate the demise of Marxist intellectual hegemony in France to the experience of Eastern European dissidence in the 1970s and its impact on French antitotalitarian thought. Tony Judt, for his part, excavated an earlier and reverse relationship between progressive intellectuals and the “captive nations.” He was indeed the first scholar to ever analyze and construct as a historical question the reactions of famous French writers to the performance of Stalinist show trials in Bulgaria, Rumania, and above all Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The sources were readily available—access to relevant issues of *Esprit*, *Les Temps Modernes*, or *Témoignage Chrétien* sufficed—but until then had been ignored by specialists of the period. Often damning, they primarily revealed how Mounier, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, and others imposed on themselves the obligation to put in perspective the ruthlessness of Stalinist political justice in order to salvage the historical necessity of Marxism and revolution. Whether, as Tony Judt argued, this “moral bifocalism” amounted to collective moral anesthesia and harkened back to a French illiberal tradition should be vigorously debated. But what the author of *Past Imperfect* crucially unveiled was the central role played by Eastern Europe in the fueling of French utopianism, much before an opposite human rights “utopia” of similar geographical origin took hold within the French intelligentsia. Attentive to the post-Cold War context during which *Past Imperfect* was written, Julian Bourg contends that Tony Judt's intervention, useful as it was, took place at a time when it was no longer needed. “Who in 1992,” he asks, “was invested in defending mid-twentieth century existentialist-Marxist historical commitment?” Few people indeed, but this was not the NYU professor's battle. His challenge was directed against the uncritical recasting of the deceased *intellectuel engagé* into a feel-good *lieu de mémoire* and against the dilution of the postwar philocommunist moment within an even-handed and colorful tale of intellectual jousts, of the kind most recently narrated by Michel Winock in his best-selling *Le siècle des intellectuels*.

At a time when French historians started to thoroughly revisit the Vichy dark years, Tony Judt's own "ever-present past" was the postwar era. In the footsteps of Czesław Miłosz and Raymond Aron and shortly before François Furet, he set out to uncover, more than to shame, the mechanisms of intellectual "accommodation" with Communist oppression.

Often portrayed as an "Anglo-Saxon liberal," Tony Judt should have accordingly acknowledged many other "responsible" intellectuals across the Channel or the Atlantic Ocean, in addition to his admiration for Camus and Aron and to his more tempered appreciation of François Mauriac. But only passing mention is made in *Past Imperfect* of the British anticommunists Stephen Spender and Bertrand Russell while American Cold War intellectuals are altogether bypassed: neither type is heralded as superior to French "irresponsibility." Displaying a skillful balance between long-term and short-term causation, *Past Imperfect* strictly remained within the bounds and possibilities of French political culture, without any thirst for liberal revenge: the intangibility of moral categories is a liberal principle to which Tony Judt subscribed without becoming in the process implausibly "neo-liberal"—a counter-intuitive label for someone who fled Thatcherism to teach in the United States and Reaganism when he briefly returned to his home country. Contrary to Julian Bourg, I do not think that Tony Judt functioned, in 1992, as the "Francis Fukuyama of French historical writing": how could he revel in the "end of History" when everything with him began with history?

As he himself acknowledged before his tragically premature death, Tony Judt viewed himself first and foremost as a historian. In this regard, *Past Imperfect* not only energized the study of the intellectual Left in postwar France—a field hitherto occupied by memoirists more than scholars—but also advocated an exciting form of historical exposition featuring both erudition and communicability. Akin to a Russian doll, Tony Judt's imbricated rhetoric opened itself up in gradual stages: the big idea always spawned a series of sub-arguments, a dramatic build-up that captivated so many readers precisely because the big picture was never lost from sight. This brand of topical argumentation involved synthesis and sparser footnotes without relinquishing empirical evidence: in *Past Imperfect* and his subsequent essays, Tony Judt showed himself as both a lumpner and a splitter, a master practitioner of *histoire-problème* who adhered much closer to the Annales School's heritage than commonly assumed. To be sure, his exceptional *oeuvre* was at the same time dazzling and unsettling. For this reason, as Ethan Kleinberg movingly points out, many of us today think with and against Tony Judt, a fitting homage as well as a testimony to his enduring influence. But if a choice is required, and at the risk of great irresponsibility, it is still irresistibly preferable to be "wrong" with Tony Judt than right with the risk-averse chronicler, the comfortable academic, and the self-proclaimed progressive.

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