

*Future of European Foreign Policy Seminar**Biographical sketch***TONY JUDT 1948 -**

To most Americans, sadly, the name Tony Judt is as likely to evoke his free speech battle with the American Jewish Committee as his illustrious academic career. Disagreements over the Israeli question aside, Judt remains one of the pre-eminent European commentators in American academia. He has authored seven books, edited four, and made frequent contributions to the *New York Review of Books*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, and the *New York Times*. Despite this prodigious volume of work, his publications are centered on two topics: the European postwar experience; and the French left. Asked about his influences, Judt cites George Lichtheim, who helped him ‘understand the twentieth century as a history of modern thinkers’.[1] Tony Judt is best described as historical anthropologist. What distinguishes his writing is his ability to treat broad topics, but in a manner that gives them the backbone of a narrative. In the context of European history, his most important contribution has been to illuminate the impact of war and collective memory on the idea of “ Europe ” as a community.

Tony Judt was born in 1948 to a Jewish family living in the east end of London. His father had come from a long line of Lithuanian rabbis whose culture Tony discovered while attending Hebrew school. Although he eventually renounced his Zionist beliefs, he would continue to be inspired by the socialist values to which he had been exposed as volunteer translator for the Israeli army.[2] After Cambridge, Judt pursued his studies under the auspices of the Ecole Normale Supérieure. Undoubtedly, his experiences in Paris contributed to what would become a long and fruitful relationship with the French political culture. His first book, *Socialism in Provence 1871-1914: A Study in the Origins of the French Modern Left*, an ‘enquiry into a political tradition that shaped a nation’[3] was above all a social history. Intellectual and cultural currents – those of Marxism, in this case - are interpreted as the agents of political change. This Marxist-inspired approach which gives a special importance to human agency would become a hallmark of Tony Judt’s style.

Judt’s fascination with the French political culture would result in three further studies, including *Marxism and the French Left: Studies in Labour and Politics in France 1830-1981* and *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956*. While the first book – because it is a study – is naturally less interesting for the current assignment, the second contains some important revelations about Judt’s position. In *Past Imperfect*, he castigates French intellectuals of the postwar on the grounds of a “self-imposed moral amnesia.” Their blind faith in Stalin’s communism and the pernicious lies they repeated in its defence is seen as a major

weakness of the French political culture. In many ways, Judt's stance mirrors that of Albert Camus in months preceding his ideological split with Jean-Paul Sartre.<sup>[4]</sup> Rather than his influences, however, it is Judt's interpretation of the postwar belief system that bears greater examination. We can already discern a certain distaste, if not an outright hostility for the alleged myths on which postwar culture was founded. This disillusionment was the seminal idea in his early work; it would find an increasingly broad application in his subsequent writing.

In the years following the publication of *Past Imperfect*, Tony Judt turned his attention to the wider issues of European history. Erich Maria Remarque's widow bequeathed her fortune to NYU and thus the Institute of European Studies bearing her late husband's name came into being under Judt's direction. The first publication of this period - the result of a speech delivered at the Bologna Center in 1995 - was 'A Grand Illusion?' Here Judt deals directly with the European Union and its prospects for the future, which, in his view, were quite bleak. In this extended essay, we find two important ideas, one old and one new.

The thread that connects this piece to his last stems from a distaste for the myths of the postwar. The Union he qualifies as a "hyper-real Europe, more European than the continent itself" is but an *Ersatz social construction* rooted in legend. One common wartime experience that contributed to a sense of unity in the postwar was "the memory of things best forgotten."<sup>[5]</sup> Outright repression of the past, in the case of Germany, and exaggerated accounts of collective resistance on the part its victims were the manifestations of this common experience. Moreover, the confluence of factors that resulted in the Union's early success - playing catch-up on 30 years of economic stagnation, 50 years of agrarian depression, and rebuilding its war-torn landscape - instilled in its inhabitants a false sense of hope. America's great wealth and the Truman administration's willingness to spend it on the Marshall Plan were also pivotal factors. What rounded out the Community's founding myth, for Judt, was the hypocrisy of western European political figures vis-à-vis these special circumstances. Safe in knowledge that the US would defend them against external threats and that Soviet interests would forbid expansion into the impoverished East, politicians hailed the Community as an all-welcoming, pan-European entity. In Judt's judgement, this myth, this illusion of a Community promising to extend to its neighbours the very benefits that had kept it rich would not survive in the post-Soviet era. That this euro-sceptic attitude grew out of his distaste for prevailing intellectual currents of the postwar is almost certain.

Despite the doubts of the euro-sceptic school to which Judt had subscribed, the founding members stuck to their rhetoric and marched forward with expansion. The second important idea in Judt's essay came in the form of a prediction, namely that the EU's expansion would elicit a preventative response by self interested nation-states. According to Judt, Europe's sense of its divisions had long been one of the "defining obsessions of its inhabitants."<sup>[6]</sup> As the Union carried out the promised expansion, divisions within could already be seen forming. The benefits of unity were unevenly distributed and the regions it favoured came to have more in common with each other than with their neighbours living in the same state. The Baden-Württemberg region in south-western Germany, the Rhône-Alpes region of France, Lombardy and Catalonia are evoked as examples of disproportionately rich "super-regions." Another division, Judt claims, could be seen in the Schengen Agreement. Nothing more than a 'highest

common factor of discriminatory political arithmetic',<sup>[7]</sup> the Schengen Agreement made Eastern European countries into tampon states designed to keep undesirable immigrants at bay. Similar dangers existed in eastern Europe where former critics of Soviet universalism deftly recycled themselves into anti-European, nationalist agitators. These problems, Judt writes, could only find their resolution in increased national intervention. Nation-states would be called upon to redistribute wealth and preserve the decaying social fabric of the societies they governed. This conception of the role of the nation-state is carried over – albeit in slightly different form - into his latest effort, 2005's *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*.

Runner-up for the Pulitzer Prize in the general non-fiction category, *Postwar* will likely become the defining work of Tony Judt's career. Just over 800 pages strong, this volume examines both the creation of myths in the immediate postwar era and their evolution into a political tradition that would come to define the continent. Analyzed in this context, *Postwar* bears a strong similarity to the writings of Eric Hobsbawm, who according to Judt, has greatly influenced his own work. Of particular interest in contrast to his previous writings is the role he assigns to nation-states in the changing political culture of the early twenty-first century. Ten years of European integration prompted a change in his stance on the type of relationship likely to exist between nation-states and the EU. Whereas *A Grand Illusion?* depicted and increasingly antagonistic relations between Brussels and its constituents, *Postwar's* projections are not so bleak.

The point of departure for Judt's assessment of contemporary Europe is the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. It was at this point, he writes, that the prosperous West was once again faced with its eastern twin, unfrozen by the collapse of communism. Because many of these nations had been successfully integrated by the time the book was written, however, Judt no longer spoke on the terms of the onerous and crippling financial burden their integration would create.<sup>[8]</sup> Instead, he focuses anew on the economic disparities within countries and the potential obstacles to expansion in the East. He alludes to the same zone of economic privilege as in *A Grand Illusion?* while consigning the role of buffer state to Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova. Meanwhile, the 'Eastern Question' is revived in the form of Turkey's potential accession and its ramifications for the European Union. Although a decade of history had altered the symptoms of a problem identified in *A Grand Illusion?* and even before, the fundamental question, in Judt's mind, remained the same: how to overcome the catastrophe that had been the first half of the twentieth century? By 1989, it was clear the communist approach had failed. The very same question had been addressed in Western Europe with the creation of a community of shared interests and benefits that they now seemed willing to extend to their neighbours in the East. The inevitable question, therefore, is whether or not this approach would ever work? What distinguishes *A Grand Illusion?* from *Postwar* is Judt's answer to this question.

Tony Judt's revised and expanded answer is the subject of the closing pages of *Postwar*. The first part of his explanation, a direct extension of the view expressed in *A Grand Illusion?*, stresses the role of nation-states. Without belittling the accomplishments of the European Union, he maintains that "men live not in markets but in communities".<sup>[9]</sup> While acknowledging that Europe's multiple identities and sovereignties overlap now more than ever, he refuses to dismiss the role of the nation-state. It had given up some authority in the economic sphere,

but it still paid pensions, insured the unemployed and educated its children and as long as this remained the case, the nation-state's legitimacy would not be challenged. The pace of economic globalization, he insists, should not be used as benchmark to judge the pace of integration in other spheres of human life.[10] Judt maintains that despite appearances, Europe will remain, as it has long been, a collection of nation-states.

The evolution of Tony Judt's opinion is clearly discerned in his appraisal of the prospects for cooperation. If insistence on the continued importance of the nation-state was gleaned from his previous work, the end of *Postwar* reveals a new faith, adapted to the developments of the last decade. The ultimate test of EU's strength as a community of values and interests, he writes, will depend on how they deal with the non-Europeans at their borders. In order for the Union to become more than the simple sum of its parts, it cannot regress into defensive patriotism. As if years of Euro-scepticism had suddenly been consigned to his own 'dustbin of history', Judt closes: "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 ."[11]

Judt's case is both interesting and particular because it would seem that his most influential work coincided with a fundamental shift in intellectual orientation. Whether this apparent shift is genuine or merely an appeal to Europhile sensibilities remains an open question. What is clear, however, is that *Postwar* will remain the reference in modern European history and make of Tony Judt a valued European commentator.

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[1] interview with The Historical Society: <http://www.bu.edu/historic/hs/judt.html>

[2] Judt had taken a year off from his studies at King's College, Cambridge to work as a driver and translator for the Israel Defense Forces during and in the aftermath of the Six-Day War.

[3] Tony Judt, *Socialism in Provence 1871-1914: A Study in the Origins of the Modern French Left*, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1979.

[4] It comes as no surprise that Judt considers Camus one of his most important inspirations, see his interview with The Historical Society: <http://www.bu.edu/historic/hs/judt.html>

[5] Tony Judt, *A Grand Illusion?* New York : Hill and Wang, 1996, p. 27.

[6] *Ibid*, p. 46.

[7] *Ibid*, p. 125.

[8] Tony Judt, *A Grand Illusion?* p. 92.

[9] Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*, London : William Heinemann, 2005, p. 796.

[10] *Ibid*, p. 798.

[11] *Postwar*, p. 800.