

Intellectuals, Reason, and History: In Memory of Tony Judt*

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Remarks at “Tony Judt: A Distinctive Presence Among Us”
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The motto of my remarks on Tony Judt and French intellectuals is “never say sorry.” It comes from a note Tony wrote to me—after I tried to do so. I had criticized him in passing in the American magazine *The Nation*, and so I reached out to him, fearful he would take my sniping amiss.¹ When someone passes, it is sad for those who knew him—but it is really a different matter when, like Tony, the man has been so central to making opinion for a whole era, and even more so when his trajectory is brutally foreshortened and people are asking where he was going and how to proceed intellectually without him. In such cases, authority sometimes seems to depend on personal ties, but I had next to none. I only met Tony personally five years into my decade so far teaching in New York City (and I met him in Switzerland). He warmed to me just a few years ago when I tried, in my amateurish way, to call him onto the carpet in that magazine piece—and I think because I did so. “No, and no, and no,” he began his response to my abortive apology. (Of course, this advice didn’t keep him from replying in print in the letters column of the magazine the next week.)²

In my piece, I noted that Tony had “made his name” criticizing French intellectuals but was now starting to say things to which those same intellectuals would have been sympathetic. In *Past Imperfect*, Tony rallied to “human rights,” claiming that they were at the heart of the European liberal tradition. Chief among their errors, Tony wrote, French intellectuals scuttled rights talk because of their hostility to formalistic credos, especially those of “bourgeois ideology.” After the invasion of Iraq, however, Tony caustically indicted (as he put it) “the abstract universalism of ‘rights’—and uncompromising ethical stands taken against malign

* I am grateful to Jerrold Seigel for discussion.

¹ Samuel Moyn, “On the Genealogy of Morals,” *The Nation*, 16 April 2007.

² Tony Judt, “Double-Entry Moral Bookkeeping,” *The Nation*, 14 May 2007, with my reply.

regimes in their name.”³ It seems to me that Tony was now voicing the very skepticism of rights that he once castigated in French intellectuals. Tony was too canny to cop to my charge of blatant contradiction—in his letter to the editor he cited a tag from a personal hero, J.M. Keynes: “When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do?”

The most admirable feature of Tony’s thinking was his refusal to allow much of a concern for consistency, foolish or not, to interfere with his learning. In another note to me less than a year before he died, Tony wrote, “I am, I discover in late middle age, a work in progress.” Actually this had been true of his career as a historian all along, but I will focus now on his relationship to the tradition of the *intellectuel français*—because I think it tells us something important about our own problems. For it was not, I think, just the facts that were changing as Tony’s career proceeded. As he went on, he was faced with an animating difficulty, which was how to forge a new version of the public intellectual on the ruins of a rejected model, namely the postwar French intellectual, whose indictment in *Past Imperfect* is still to be relished. I think everyone can agree that, even if he never successfully defended his approach theoretically, Tony did end up enacting a very attractive intellectualism—though, in one critical respect I will claim, he might have gone further.

Historically speaking, *Past Imperfect* is a specimen of antitotalitarianism, in fact a belated fruit of an earlier moment in French thought that Tony helped make vivid to Anglo-American readers. For everyone influenced by this moment, and the best thinkers of a whole generation were, the powerful attractions of the denunciation of communism as first task left the heavy burden of finding a sequel. For to put it bluntly, once you courageously denounce totalitarianism, lots of options still remain, and your project of denunciation will not help you choose among those options. To know what you are for, it is not enough to know what you are against.

Struggling with this dilemma of a sequel to antitotalitarianism occurred on many fronts, but what we might call the dilemma of public intellectualism remained among the most dramatic ones. Antitotalitarianism also originated as a critique of *maître-penseurs*, leaving the peculiar difficulty for those who adopted antitotalitarianism that they were forced to choose between two options. The first option was being intellectuals whose mission is simply to denounce intellectuals; the second was to redefine that famous French category in some new and different way.

How did Tony deal with this difficulty?

In the beginning it seemed as if he was tempted by the first option, as an extensive passage from the end of *Past Imperfect* suggests:

In practice, the writer or scholar who aspires to that public position which defines intellectuals and distinguishes them from mere scribblers has always had to choose between being the apologist for rulers or an advisor to the people; the tragedy of the twentieth century is that these two functions have ceased to exist independently of one another, and intellectuals like Sartre who thought they were fulfilling one role were inevitably drawn to play both. If their successors, in France or elsewhere, are truly to put this past behind them, it will not be enough

³ Tony Judt, “Bush’s Useful Idiots,” *London Review of Books*, 21 September 2006.

to recognize past mistakes. It will also be necessary to accept that entailed in the very meaning for modern society of the term *intellectual* are a number of roles that writers and scholars today may no longer wish to fulfill; indeed, a *refusal* to occupy the post of the (engaged) intellectual may be the most positive of the steps modern thinkers can take in any serious effort to come to terms with their own responsibility for our common recent past.⁴

In denouncing French intellectualism in this parting shot in his book, Tony seemed to be setting out to minimize expectations about the public role of thinkers. This deflationary conclusion to a withering study of intellectual malfeasance strongly suggested that nothing remained but repentance for crimes past and modesty or even technocracy to avoid repeating them.

Modesty and technocracy, however, are not words I would use to describe Tony's later public stands—and he definitely transcended being a mere scribbler. So he must have moved from the first option to the second, seeking to find some new model of the public intellectual, one not risking the errors of the totalitarian apologists but also not one who restricts his activity to exposing those errors.

It's true, of course, that Tony soon followed this deflationary criticism of the *intellectuel engagé* at his worst with brilliant pen portraits, in *The Burden of Responsibility*, of three good ones, Léon Blum, Albert Camus, and Raymond Aron. "Responsibility," unfortunately, was one of Tony's haziest concepts, difficult to distinguish from engagement. Probably it mainly signified that almost immediately Tony saw the undesirability of simply leaving the public intellectual behind. But since responsibility rarely seemed to mean much more than denouncing the blindness of French engagement and its blandishments towards evil regimes, as in Aron's *Opium of the Intellectuals* or Camus' *The Rebel*, it did not at all point in the direction of some positive role for intellectuals. Further, after totalitarianism disappeared, the basically parasitic role of antitotalitarian responsibility declined in significance too. Even as Tony clearly transcended the call to modesty of *Past Imperfect*, he ultimately went far beyond the vague and reactive credo of the moralist.

After his death, in fact, some worried that Tony in effect became the sort of French intellectual he had once attacked, as if his utopian cosmopolitanism, at least as applied to Israel, were no less sensitive to historical context and particularist loyalty than communism had once been: an "odd [stance]," his ex-friend Steven Zipperstein for one remarked of Tony's anti-Zionism, "for a historian then best known for analyzing the dystopian underbelly of the twentieth century's most ruthless, transformative political movements."⁵ It would be better, however, to say that there was lots of territory to explore between the smashed idol of the French intellectual and the choice—with which Tony flirted before also rejecting it—of not being a public intellectual at all.

⁴ Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944–1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 319.

⁵ Steven Zipperstein, "The Two Tony Judts," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 5 September 2010.

His career after 2001 suggests he concluded there was limited mileage to get out of the antitotalitarian denunciation of wayward thinkers that accounted for Tony's initial fame. True, Tony did a good deal—especially in leading public fora like the *New Republic* and the *New York Review*—to promote an approach to European and especially French intellectuals that emphasized their totalitarian perfidy. But he moved beyond this now tiresome genre, just as he moved beyond merely academic battles. Tony's *Past Imperfect* was also, perhaps above all, an indirect and refreshing attack against American enthusiasm for current French theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. But aside for some local zones of power in the academy, there was never any threat that the jargon-ridden trendiness that Tony reviled would become truly dominant intellectually, let alone advance totalitarian evil in the world. You might say that after 2001 Tony realized that it wasn't French intellectuals, or American professors in their thrall, who were most worth denouncing, but states and their policies. But this raised the question of what sort of state to build, and which policies to enact, and above all what (if anything) intellectuals could and should do to help—questions that being against totalitarianism doesn't help answer.

Tony's move beyond the antitotalitarian critique of intellectuals to more programmatic concerns was very much to be welcomed, and he was unsparing toward former allies who failed to make the same move—especially towards those antitotalitarians in Eastern Europe, Western Europe, and the United States who rallied to George W. Bush's cause as if it followed directly from their antitotalitarianism. Tony's evolution was not totally unforeseeable, though it was still quite surprising. As he reminded me in his letter to the editor, even before *Past Imperfect* and its celebration of rights against the state, Tony had admonished his cherished East European dissidents for thinking they could do with human rights alone—"living in truth," as Václav Havel put it. After all, Tony observed, it very much mattered what sort of state they hoped to build on the ruins of the totalitarian one they were facing down. Toward the end of his life, Tony revived what had begun as a passing critique of dissident "antipolitics" for neglecting the programmatic demand for social alternatives—and began searching for some alternatives himself.⁶

I don't want my argument to be misunderstood. Tony's engagement remained situational—linked to an urbane skepticism that saved him from intellectual enthusiasm. Evidently, he never flirted with reviving the revolutionary idea that had been the stock in trade of the *intellectuel engagé*. Whatever the brand of his own intellectualism, it was different from the "intellectual sheen" (his phrase) Tony associated with Parisian voices as much because of their form as because of their content.⁷ Yet the sort of social democratic revival for which Tony stirringly called in *Ill Fares the Land* is a large step beyond antitotalitarian liberalism and, in terms of Tony's public role, an embrace of the intellectual's mission and the visionary and even utopian imagination of alternatives that have typically gone along with it.⁸

⁶ Tony Judt, "The Dilemmas of Dissidence: The Politics of Opposition in East-Central Europe," *East European Politics and Society* 2, n. 2 (March 1988): 185-240.

⁷ Tony Judt, "Paris Was Yesterday," *New York Review of Books*, 11 March 2010, rpt. in *The Memory Chalet* (New York: Penguin Press, 2010), 118.

⁸ Judt, *Ill Fares the Land* (New York: Penguin Press, 2010); for the limitations of social-democratic nostalgia, see my "Studying the Fault Lines," *Dissent* 58, 2 (Spring 2011): 101-105.

There was one place, however, that Tony would not go, and it's this persisting shortcoming of his elaboration of the model of the intellectual he once came close to ditching on which I'd like to dwell in conclusion. I refer to the place of "social theory" on which the French intellectual's public role had always depended. The main, perhaps sole, model of such theory that Tony had before him for all this life was, of course, Marxism. As a historian, Tony knew that intellectuals were never just commentators about the polity, for they won their authority to speak based on their interpretations of the world. Even as Tony imported to Anglo-American precincts the sort of *histoire des intellectuels* that tended to skirt difficult concepts in the name of more legible action, he registered clearly the risk of opacity that the critique of intellectuals courted in its attack on Marxist explanation. François Furet, who influenced Tony so profoundly, surprised some of his readers by closing his otherwise pervasively antitotalitarian last book, *The Passing of an Illusion*, by worrying that Marxism's fall made, in Furet's words, "the idea of another society ... almost impossible to conceive[;] no one in the world today is offering any advice on the subject or even trying to formulate a new concept. Here we are, condemned to live the world as it is."⁹ A few pieces of evidence show that Tony concurred that Marxism's disappearance not so much as a political design but rather an explanatory project threatened the confidence in the intelligibility of history on which leftist and even liberal progress had always depended. A theory was needed to provide grounds for believing that society is a matter of collective interdependence, that modernity is about emancipation, and that even now moral solidarity with the wretched of the earth requires more work to be done. For a long time, Marxism had been that theory—but Tony never focused on the problem of its replacement.

I know Tony was concerned by the intellectual problem of Marxism's disappearance because he cited over and over again in his career the following sentence by a French thinker who made serious mistakes but, Tony eventually acknowledged, best formulated the risk of opacity when intellectuals have no social theory. "Marxism is not a philosophy of history," Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote in *Humanism and Terror*. "It is the philosophy of history, and to renounce it is to dig the grave of Reason in history."¹⁰ Significantly, as I pointed out to Tony, he misquoted this line (even after having gotten it right many times before) in the last *New York Review* piece in which he invoked it. "After that there can be no more dreams or adventures," Tony continued his citation at first, wrongly suggesting that Marxism was about picaresque diversion.¹¹ In the corrected version in *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century*, Merleau-Ponty's actual claim is as follows: "After that, there can only be dreams and adventures."¹² Tony ultimately recognized that Marxism had never been about flights of fancy or irresponsible fun—it was about understanding the world as a condition for changing it (whatever the last of Karl Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach" may have said). Significantly, in this piece on Leszek

⁹ François Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Deborah Furet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 502.

¹⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror: An Essay on the Communist Problem*, trans. John O'Neill (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 153.

¹¹ Tony Judt, "Goodbye to All That?," *New York Review of Books*, September 21, 2006.

¹² Tony Judt, *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), 137.

Kolakowski, originally published not long before Tony's illness, he went so far as to say that social democracy like the left in general had depended on Marxism because of Marxism's unique claim to discern meaning in history as well as to make the meaning of history connect with hope for its victims.

Obviously, Tony never became a Marxist even when he soon after decided to champion social democracy as his last act. But these comments were a far cry from his former dismissal of Marxism as a delusional politics with theory playing only the role of indefensible apologetics for terror. All the same, Tony did not feel that his standard bearing for social democracy required much more than moralistic rhetoric in its defense. His grudging admission of Marxism's relevance for social democracy in the past did not lead him to insist on some new theory justifying his politics now. (In fact, Tony feared that given continuing injustice the most likely outcome for the foreseeable future was Marxism's revival in theoretical debates.) Tony doesn't appear to have contemplated that his struggle to reinvent the model of the intellectual committed him, if only to ward off Marxism, to some other return to the tradition of social thought that had defined "theory" until postmodern intellectuals gave the word a different meaning and bad name.

One reason, then, to keep Tony Judt's presence in our midst is to remember his example as a warrant for the reinvention of intellectualism beyond where he took it. The French intellectual is dead, including in France today. "In my day," Tony observed last year, "Paris was the intellectual center of the world. Today it feels marginal to the international conversation. French intellectuals still generate occasional heat, but such light as they emit comes to us from a distant sun—perhaps already extinct."¹³ That's true. Yet no one who values the politics Tony took up at the end of his life can afford to make intellectual life simply a matter of taking the right positions. Anyway, what makes them right? The currently prestigious answer to this question is some sort of normative conception; but with his respect for history and schooling in Marxism, Tony knew that the disappearance of social theory, our common fate today, is not to be remedied so easily. The programmatic alternative to the present Tony came to favor—imagining a different future—depends, as he saw, on a social theory underlying it. And in spite of the fact that Marxism towered over the modern landscape, there are other possibilities. Keynes—Tony's apparent hero at the end—presupposed a social theory too, though so did Friedrich Hayek, and the point is not just to revive their dispute simply to take sides but rather to understand their contention as the clash of philosophical visions it was, both broadly about the nature of social life and more narrowly about the place of modernity in it.

I do realize Tony might well have rejected my suggestion that, as a work in progress, he was brought to the brink of some salvageable and indeed essential elements of the *intellectuel français*—above all his social theory—that seemed to him merely perverse before.

But I don't think he would have demanded my apology.

¹³ Judt, "Paris Was Yesterday," 118.

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