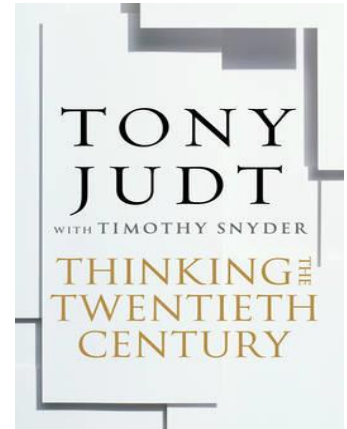


Snyder, Timothy; Judt, Tony. 2012. *Thinking the Twentieth Century: Intellectuals and Politics in the Twentieth Century*. Penguin Books, 432 p. Reprint Ed. Jan. 29 2013.

Reviewed by Mihai Muresan
Babeş-Bolyai University



"I'd like to call you all by name" was the famous statement of Anna Akhmatova when her mind wandered to the legions of dead that made killing fields forever remembered and houses empty. Where she left off, at the end of the Second World War, as to shadow any possible peace and future became for some just a simple futility, it was Tony Judt's duty to present, explain and acknowledge that a different Europe emerged from the ashes of the age of extremes. His Magnum Opus, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* keeps the same observant measure as Akhmatova, a mix of simple words with powerful meaning.

Following a career that had ups and downs in the ossified academic mantra, first in England, then in France, and finally in the United States, Judt was the epitome of those who seek the true value of the intellectuals and of the people they claim to represent, unveiling at the same time the fine mist between reality, remembrance and myth. His studies were a complex undertaking, ranging from the French Intelligentsia in the 1930's which became his Ph.D. subject, to how we can define Eastern Europe, what are the elements of states who grappled both with democracy and totalitarianism, and finally, seconds on his "Memory Chalet", once his motor neuron disease became a fact not just a nuisance. They were all in all thoughts hard to ignore. A renowned New York Review of Books contributor, a Pulitzer Prize contender and winner of the Hannah Arendt and Orwell Prizes, famous for his leftist opinions better explained in *Ill Fares the Land*, who were not following an ideological statement but were more a part in a moral defensive, a classical Zionist for whom Israel was both a home and a dream of peace and not a superpower, these were just some of his multifaceted sides, who ended in a timely and serene death in 2010.

This is the main reason for which another renowned historian, Timothy Snyder, famous for studies on Russia, Totalitarianism and World War II, whose best book *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* was a huge international success, wanted to remember the many aspects of his hero, Judt.

Created as a series of conversations between the two, the final book of Tony Judt "Thinking the Twentieth Century" (Penguin Books, 432 p. Reprint Ed. Jan. 29 2013), brings forward a list of final thoughts when he, unable to speak, to type, uses the patience of Snyder, and, with the limits of personal frustration blurred, remembers his life both as a writer and as a person. Each chapter starts with a moment on his life reassessed in chronological fashion, but after a few pages the same chapters transpose the reader to a world about which, day after day, Judt has imprinted personal conclusions. As Snyder remembers in the opening lines: "It is a history of modern political ideas in Europe and the United States. Its subjects are power and justice, as understood by liberal, socialist, communist, nationalist and fascist intellectuals from the late nineteenth through the early twenty-first century. It is also the intellectual biography of the historian and essayist Tony Judt, born in London in the middle of the twentieth century, just after the cataclysm of the Second World War and the Holocaust, and just as communists were securing power in Eastern Europe. Finally, it is a contemplation of the limitations (and capacity for renewal) of political ideas, and of the moral failures (and duties) of intellectuals in politics."

The story begins with his Jewish upbringing in London. From simple words about his father and mother, Judt translates the family's Jewishness in a broader aspect regarding how they were treated in the old Austria. Then, a *mélange* between Kafka, Freud, Austrian *fin de siècle*, Hayek, are taking over in the discourse. Being a Jew is as complex as being a human being, as from man to victim a single step could be needed. This is the basis for his obsession on "telling the truth" as a form of maximal/minimal experience in history and memory.

The second chapter goes from his education to what English education means. It is hard to decipher the place of culture in everyday life, as educated men cheered Hitler or fought his ideology both in England and in France. Culture was a hard moral endeavor: "What we see at work, I believe, was a variety of approaches to the problem of restoring order and predictability to moral or aesthetic judgment. One of the concerns that would characterize the 1930s in England – and would echo down through

the 1950s—was a fear of drowning in “relativism,” whether intellectual or political. Like Sartre, strange as the comparison may sound, Eliot (and Leavis, so influential upon the generation of my teachers) spoke for the view that one must make choices, that not caring was no longer an option and that normative criteria for judgment needed to be identified, though it was not always clear whence they should be retrieved. “”

The next chapter is an excursion in the many faceted Marxism. As a socialist, Judt explains the beneficial statements of Marx, not as ideology but as a building block for other optics. Some followers were brought into the Soviet fold, using Lenin as a beacon. Others preferred market economy, were devout interventionist as Keynes. This does not make equal signs between Socialism Communism, Marxism and National-Socialism. As Judt puts it to explain the incredible attractions of the latter: “I simply cannot think of a single Nazi intellectual whose reasoning holds up as an interesting historical account of twentieth-century thought. Conversely, I can think of a number of reasons for reading carefully—if not sympathetically—the distasteful writings of certain Romanian and Italian fascist intellectuals. I don’t mean that fascism in its non-German form was somehow more tolerable, more digestible to us because in the end it was not about genocide, the wholesale destruction of peoples etc. I mean that other fascisms operated in a recognizable framework of nationalist resentment or geographical injustice that was not only intelligible, but which had and still has some broader applicability if we wish to make sense of the world around us.”

He then follows his Zionist roots. As a member of a Kibbutz in newly formed Israel, the pressure to form a new Eden, one devout of pains that remained after Auschwitz, was his credo. What Israel wanted to be and what Judt believed it has become were elements that – when he describes a more present action – were not creating a proper state. This did not imply he was a harsh critic of Israel, it implies he was considered a New Yorker a man who did not understand the country he had admired once.

As he retraces his Parisian academic journey, Judt makes reference to the role and function of a French Intellectual. Paris under the presidency of Leon Blum became his main academic interest, the socialist France poised to brake the class antagonism in the 1930’s, but blocked by the Great Depression and the rise of the far right. The pages have an interesting excursion in the Romanian history to which Judt had a devout interest, balancing from similarities to differences in what both fascism and communism have.

His career takes a turn for Czech culture and language, as the home of Kafka, the need for liberalization of the Eastern bloc, the values of Central Europe remained a core objective for the historian. This time, it was communism who blocked the same culture who paid for its image. To fight any aspect of it, whether economic or cultural, even in a small measure meant to fight the whole system. This was the great failure of the communist idea.

The book ends with the two coins of his American live: social-democracy and the morals of American culture. Both have special elements and the recurrence to France reminds the reader his intellectual roots in the deep seated continental Europe. America remains an ideal, albeit not perfect, but part of his life, of his culture, of his thoughts on the Iraq War, 9/11 and the news/political landscape. Everything is changing and America will be the forefront of that change.

The discussion remains one of the best between two fully developed intellectuals. The passion of Snyder to ask Judt about life and culture, his vast pool of ideas as perfect replies are a challenge well prepared for the reader. It puts oneself in the confines of a great mind, lost now, but whose copy in inked pages are a perpetual unforgettable reread. As Akhmatova, the simplicity of arguments, created in a vast pool of knowledge makes statements become important. And simple.

Bibliography:

- Akhmatova, Anna; Thomas D.M. *Selected Poems*. Penguin Classics 1992, reprint.
- Judt, Tony. *Ill Fares the Land*. The Penguin Press HC. 2010.
- Judt, Tony. *The Memory Chalet*. Penguin Press HC. 2012.
- Judt, Tony. *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*. Penguin Books 2006.
- Snyder, Timothy; Judt, Tony. *Thinking the Twentieth Century: Intellectuals and Politics in the Twentieth Century*. Penguin Books, 432 p. Reprint Ed. Jan. 29 2013