

Reappraisals

Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century

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This is a collection of essays, most of the published in the NYR. This probably means that I have read most of those before, and I am shocked that I do not seem to have remembered any. Did they make such a shallow impression at the time, or is it that memory is not up to par. Spending your time reading those literary reviews is a waste. As they say in Swedish, it goes into one ear only to exit at the other.

Any collection of essays will be of varying quality, this is inevitable with any collection of independent items. If they hang together, it is different, than each and every one contributes in some sense, and cannot afford to be removed. With collections as such, there is no real compelling reason for one to be included and not the other.

There are certain themes. The Middle East is one of them. On this issue Judt antagonized a lot of people by advocating a One State Solution. The Two State Solution is the default, in fact so obvious, once the Palestinians of the PLO had given up the idea of permanent expulsion of the Jews (although Hamas may still entertain it, it would in a sense be pointless did they not). But of course the Israeli government has made this a Two State a travesty. Settlements in occupied territories have had as the stated goal to make facts on the ground. This is a common semi-criminal stratagem. We know that we did wrong, but now it is done, and it is very hard to change it. Let us be reasonable and go on from here. The same argument can be made for murder. It was of course unfortunate, but it cannot be undone, so let us make the best of the situation. The Palestinians have suffered endless humiliation. Not big ones, tiny ones, but steady and accumulating. It makes it hard to draw the line. What are the facts on the ground? Settlements spread around, and between them lines of communications off limits for the natives. What we are witnessing is the classical removal of the third. What the Palestinians eventually will be left with is simply a Canto set of measure zero. Once the Two State Solution has been made untenable, there is only the One State Solution left. This is an idea that Judt probably has gotten from Edward Said, a good friend, whom he devotes an essay. The problem with the One State Solution is that it will make the idea of a Jewish State moot. At least in the not so long run. It would be the end of Zionism. Would that be such a bad thing after all? Nationalism in Europe is on the wane. It had its day in the 19th century and reached its pinnacle at Versailles. That postwar settlement made a travesty of the principle. Look at Poland, and look at Rumania, the latter country more than doubling its size, carving out a big slice out of the defeated Hungarians. This was making a mockery of National and linguistic identity. Nowadays nationalism has been made to have a bad name. Nationalist political movements that strive to keep the nations spirit alive are shunned. Nowadays states should have other purposes, not to be the custodian of ethnic identities. In the end the different nationalities will just be diluted and fade

out. Globalization will reign supreme. Zionism is a late comer to the scene. It is too late, nations are sold out. One can to some extent sympathize with the bitterness. Its like countries of the Third World being told that you cannot pollute, you cannot grow, you cannot strive for consumer societies. We did that. We polluted too much, now there is no more space to pollute. Pollution is out. We grew, and overextended ourselves. Now we should not grow anymore, just stay in place. And a consumer society, forget about it. We enjoyed it, but now we have become satiated. You should too. Too bad you never got to enjoy it, but that is tough luck. Judt is not popular among American Jews. He also writes about the Six Day War, how this triumph went to the head of the nation. A nation that refused to grow up. A nation wanting to be seen as a normal one, yet to demand special treatment. A nation that has ruthlessly strived for military superiority, and who wants in addition to be a bully and inspire the fear of God in its neighbours, also want to be pitied and seen as weak and vulnerable. The list can go on. No wonder that Judt is shunned by ordinary American Jews. In fact the support for the Israeli power politics is at its most unqualified in the States. In Israel it is different. They live with the Third World in their backyard (as did the White Apartheid regime), they are exposed to the realities. American Jews cheer them on with no second thoughts. But Fundamental Christians are even blinder in their dogmatic support for the Holy Land. Those are the worst. But outside America, Israel has few if any friends. The Europeans are aghast. Yet there is always the Holocaust card. Any criticism of Israel can ultimately be clobbered and quenched by that trump. There is no suite that ranks higher. Any critic of Israel must at heart be an anti-Semite, whose ultimate purpose is the extermination of the Jewish race. See what happened once, see what will happen again, unless we keep eternal vigilance. It is hard to argue against this, it is even harder to win. No wonder it leads to frustration and resentment, maybe in the very end to real hatred. Prophecies are self-fulfilling in their nature. Let us leave the Middle East.

There is an interesting piece on Koestler, the subject of recent biographies. The sexual behavior of Koestler has recently been subjected to much censure. Judt refuses to join in the outrage. The sexual practices of Koestler, if unsavory from our perspective, were not at his time and age, and more to the point they have no bearings whatsoever on what he wrote. That is a good point. Judt on Levi and Hannah Arendt and Camus, is less interesting, those essays tend to be rambling, as if he does not know when to stop and call it a day. He writes masterly on Althusser and his phony Marxism, and makes the important point, how far can academics been led astray. He does not phrase it so brutally, but I guess he easily could have. Does much touted academic freedom just lead to silliness. He writes respectfully on Hobsbawm, and it is hard not too, yet he calls him to task for being so cavalier about the misdeeds of Communism. Maybe Hobsbawm never really was a committed Communist? Certainly he never seemed to have worked on the nuts and bolt level, which made Communism in its time so effective, and without which it would never have made much of an impact beyond idle academic speculation. Hobsbawm comes across as an intelligence aristocrat, to whom the masses are beyond contempt, and do not really know what is best for them. Hobsbawm does of course. Maybe he was never really a Communist, and this is why he feels no need to speak out, even when it just comes to leaving the party. Maybe he stays on just to spite, to show that he can rise to the top,

even with the luggage of Marxism. And maybe he has a sentimental spot for it, after all it fired his youth, and what fired your youth will always remain very close to your heart. Judt also writes intriguingly about the ex-Marxist Kolakowski and his three volume work on Marxism. The definite treatment? Marxism has appeal, Judt admits, he himself was stricken by it in his youth. It has great intellectual appeal, and this can easily be seen. But its appeal is deeper than just being seductive, otherwise how could so many of the best mind of the century have fallen for it?

He writes about the fall of France. Hitler egged his reluctant generals on, who in a daring attack routed the French army. (As Celine remarked, no matter how fast the civilian population was fleeing the enemy, they could not keep up let alone catch up with the retiring French army.) It could hardly have been a coincidence. The scales could not have been tipped. The German advantage was so solid. And in fact in many ways it was a repeat of the Prussian advance seventy years earlier. Now could you extol the advantages of a Nazi army without at the same time applauding its temporary triumph. After all quality is good intrinsically, even when serving evil forces? Rommel is a case in point. The Allies needed a German hero, you want to respect your enemy (or maybe there was a secret unconscious identification with the enemy or at least some parts of him?), and what better man to pin those frustrated admirations on than Rommel. He was not a Nazi really, he was just a brilliant general. We would have loved to have him on our side. And besides was he not forced to commit suicide? (As in Roman times. If you accepted your fate, your possessions would not be confiscated but your family would enjoy them. And besides you would get an honorable funeral.) In the years following the War, when everybody was paralyzed with denial, and having just one desire, to get on with life. Then you could idolize Rommel in movies (was he not once played by James Mason). Now it would be impossible. Times are less forgiving. And to return to efficiency in battle. The Germans were better when fights were made on fair conditions. What wore them down was the material superiority of the Allies, they could draw on almost inexhaustible resources. But does that not make the Germans heroic? Fighting against such odds? Yes, Hitler certainly must have thought so, and if you want, why not concede it. They were heroic, but who says heroism is good and laudable. It might have been at the heart of their evil core. And as to superiority, it is said that the German armies were better because they were less hierarchial than the Allied, if you insist, they were more Democratic. Is this not an irony that is too sweet and sour to resist? Of course on such matters Judt does not delve. He is courageous but not suicidal. No need to walk out on weak branches just for the fun of seeing how far you can go before they inevitably break.

He writes interestingly on Belgium, by any standards the least interesting of all European country. There is no Belgian language (in fact as we will note there are two, and neither is Belgian), there is no Belgian nation. On what is the country founded? On a compromise? Why does not one part belong to Dutchland, and the other half to France? Would that not be the obvious Salomonic solution. If it would be slashed in two no one would cry because it does not even have a true mother. The Belgians are ready to cut each others throats. They hate each other. On the other hand why should they bother? The have it good, they are rich, passions may be great, but not great enough to be really acted upon. There will come no nothing. Wealth breeds lazy contentment. It may be boring

but it is convenient. Rumania is different, as noted above it doubled its size, without lifting an arm, spilling none of its blood. It was once in the 30's a rich country of sorts, its capital was impressive, all those wide avenues, I can testify, having walked many a street in the city. But it was a country rotten to the core. Its readiness to commit atrocity, be it against Jews or whatever, made even the Nazis balk. On the battlefield they proved totally incompetent. (Once again does the competence of the Germans to some extent qualify the horrors of Nazism? When after all it was exactly the military brilliance of the Wehrmacht which gave power to the Nazis. Or should we think of the Wehrmacht too as a kind of victim? It was let down, its goals diverted and perverted, madness imposed on it, had it only been kept alone to do its thing. No wonder the generals plotted to kill the Fuehrer. Had he been killed, Sovietunion may have been vanquished and an honorable peace may have been attained. So they thought no doubt. They were honorable men.). Rumania had a very bad history prior to the Second World War, but that is forgotten. Its bad and tragic history after the War, is however remembered, and they are pitied. There was Ceausescu, was there ever a worse character? (Come on, he was second-rate at whatever he tried, including dictatorship). And he was courted by the West so assiduously, he was after all our 'Commie' such a welcome chink in the eastern armour. He did not take part in the occupation of Czechoslovakia. He was a brave man standing up. And even better he had removed Rumania from the Warzaw pact. (In all negotiations between the States and the Sovietunion, the latter was very polite in not letting on that the Warzaw pact was actually part of the Western Alliance but pretending it was part of the Russian might.). There is a word for such a thing in which the West engaged. It is called clutching for straws. And so he was killed, a simple local despot, shot like a dog in the street, without the benefit of a proper trial. After all who shot him, who had him killed? Not the people, but fellow Communists. After the fall of Ceausescu Rumania has experienced a free fall. Even when you are lying very low, there is still a latitude of descent. The point is that the bad history of Rumania is not just restrained to the post-war. Maybe the country should simply be disassembled.

Judt has no lost love for Blair. Who does nowadays. He was once the wonderkid, making labour sexy again. Judt only observes that without Thatcher there would not have been a Blair. Maybe the greatest evil perpetrated by her was making Blair possible. Judt has not much love for Kissinger either, but Kissinger is not quite as fake. He once had a very high reputation, but it was all show. Kissinger and Nixon, although no doubt doing one good thing or two, were poison to each other. What about Kennedy? Once a hero, now sullied. Still there was the Cuba missile crisis. Kennedy handled it laudably, he refused to be taken in. Not only the generals were frantic for action, even people like Fulbright, who would later make a career out of being peacenicks, were screaming for blood, while ironically those very men who a few years later would be pushing the Vietnam War, here showed commendable restraint and moderation. Kennedy was wise enough to listen to wise advice. One shudders what would have happened had Bush Jr been in the same pants. Personalities do make a difference. There has been a degeneration of Presidential quality and character. Judt does not say so, but would he really be ready not to confer?

We won the Cold War. How triumphant is not the cry. The end of history. Representative democracy and market economies. Those are the pinnacles of Western political

and social wisdom, once the annoying aberrations have proved themselves impotent. Judt takes issue with such facile self-congratulations. The West so eager to press on their advantage squandered a golden opportunity. But he is crying out to deaf ears. Judt is no Marxism, but he is an old-fashioned Social Democrat, arguing for the place of the public, that the state has to matter, that it alone is able to provide services, the nature of which the market is intrinsically unable to provide. Who will listen to him now when he is dead?

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