
Tony Judt was an award-winning historian and noted public intellectual with a career spanning more than twenty years. Judt focused upon Modern European history, especially aspects of twentieth-century ideology and identity. He wrote empathetically and well on subjects such as French Marxism and socialism, as well as contributing a wide range of essays to publications such as the *Times Literary Supplement*, *The New York Times* and *The New York Review of Books*. His career reached its height in 2005 with the publication of *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*, a work that was a finalist for both the Samuel Johnson Prize and the Pulitzer Prize. In short, Tony Judt was able to combine both academic and popular work, becoming a significant and well-regarded public intellectual.

This intellectual journey began to end in 2008, when Judt was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a neurodegenerative disorder for which there is no cure:

You can no longer write independently, requiring either an assistant or a machine to record your thoughts. Then your legs fail and you cannot take in new experiences...next you begin to lose your voice: not just in the metaphorical sense...but quite literally in that the diaphragm muscles can no longer pump sufficient air across your vocal cords to furnish them with the variety of pressure required to express meaningful sound. By this point you are almost certainly quadriplegic and condemned to long hours of immobility, whether or not in the presence of others. For someone wishing to remain a communicator of words and concepts, this poses an unusual challenge. (pp.4-5)

*The Memory Chalet* was Judt’s final work. Dictated as he lay, immobilised by the disorder that would eventually claim his life, various pieces from this collection were published in *The Guardian* and *The New York Review of Books*. Collected together, they do not constitute a final statement (Judt’s *Ill Fares the Land* might better fit that role), but present instead Judt’s musings on a range of topics, including the ills of privatisation, his time spent on a kibbutz during the 1960s, French intellectuals, and his travels across the United States. Yet these are thoughts not fully formed – Judt admits in the introduction that they were not originally intended for publication. For a better idea of Judt’s fully formed and polished, “intended for publication” thoughts, his collection *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century* is worth finding.

So what purpose, then, *The Memory Chalet*? This work allows the reader into the mind of an intellectual as he is reduced to being *solely* mind, and reflects on the experiences that led him to pursue a life of the mind. The “memory chalet” of the title is the device Judt used to keep himself sane as his body turned against him, a mental place he could retreat to, resembling a Swiss chalet from his youthful holidays with his family, stored with his memories and ideas:

Each night, for days, weeks, months, and now well over a year, I have returned to that chalet. I have passed through its familiar short corridors with their worn stone steps and settled into one of two or perhaps three armchairs – conveniently unoccupied by others. And thence, the wish fathering the thought with reasonably unerring
reliability, I have conjured up, sorted out and ordered a story or an argument or an example that I plan to use in something I shall write the following day. (p.7)

With this evocative start, Tony Judt takes the reader through a journey of various colours and shades. It acts in part as a biography, and we get a sense of Judt’s family, their Jewish background, and his father’s obsession with cars that stemmed from a married life and work that was frustrating and boring. We get glimpses of the austerity measures that growing up in England in the 1950s entailed, the hated school days of the late ‘50s and early 1960s, and the liberation that Cambridge provided. As we follow the emerging Judt through these pieces, we glimpse the man behind the child. The section dealing with his time spent in a kibbutz, which Judt undertook in the summers of 1963, 1965 and 1967, shows the evolution of the political viewpoints that would later lead to a controversial stance against Zionism and Israeli policy.¹

It is interesting to note that Judt’s split with his kibbutz colleagues came with his decision to go to Cambridge, a decision that went against the spirit of “Aliya”, which “presumed the severing of links and opportunities back in the diaspora.” (p.96). His exposure to this ideology meant that he was “immune to the enthusiasms and seductions of the New Left, much less its radical spin-offs.” Judt notes that:

Even before turning twenty I had become, been, and ceased to be a Zionist, a Marxist and a communitarian settler: no mean achievement for a south London teenager. (p.98)

As he moves through Cambridge and the academy, Judt gives his thoughts on the state of university education, in a state of flux when he entered, moving away from an old elitism to a more egalitarian model. Something, Judt argued, was lost in this move, and amounts almost to a denial of what universities are:

Universities are elitist: they are about selecting the most able cohort of a generation and educating them to their ability – breaking open the elite and making it consistently anew. Equality of opportunity and equality of outcome are not the same thing. (p.145)

In making these remarks, Judt steers a very careful path, avoiding coming across as a reactionary. The problem, he says, lies more in the confusion that he now sees in institutions like Cambridge over the purpose and intent of higher education. These arguments will only intensify in the post-global financial crisis world.

Judt finished his work with his initial image of the chalet of his childhood holidays, to the Mürren of his youth. It is a place of comfort for him:


The final section The Memory Chalet concludes on this evocative note, a short but compelling testimony to one man’s extraordinary mind.

Andrew Broertjes

The University of Western Australia