

BARTŁOMIEJ BŁESZNOWSKI
University of Warsaw

Biography and the 20th Century Tony Judt's Project of a Political Death

Abstract: The aim of this article is to analyse the political and mnemonic programme to be found in the last books of the British historian and thinker Tony Judt. The author of this article assumes that the final period of Judt's writing, in which he produced *Ill Fares the Land*, *The Memory Chalet*, and the posthumously published discussion with Timothy Snyder entitled *Thinking the Twentieth Century*, is dependent on a kind of 'art of memory'. For Judt, being terminally ill with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis and thus condemned to immobility, this method became not so much—as in the case of its classic varieties—a technology of remembering, as a manner of recognizing and analyzing the contemporary world by turning to his own biography. The purpose was to construct a 'political testament' for the Western world in a time of crisis whose roots, according to Judt, can be found in the supremacy that 'economic' thinking has achieved over traditional political thought. In a gesture reminiscent of the Stoic 'techniques of the self' described by Michel Foucault, Judt, by exploiting his own no less complicated biography and identity, tries to throw light on the complicated history of the 20th century, containing the sources of 'our contemporary ills'. Biography and history thus meet here in a 'work of memory' whose horizon and catalyzer is the perspective of death, and whose stake is the idea of a political community experiencing, according to Judt, a period of inertia.

Keywords: intellectual biography, political biography, history of the 20th century, politics, social memory, death.

The Entity: Memory and History

Tony Judt's last book undoubtedly falls within the tradition of thinking about the entity as a lonely and nontransparent individuum, the individual exposed to eternal misunderstanding and divided by a wall of consciousness from other, like individuals. Judt appears here to approach Leibniz's monadology or Locke's concept of the consciousness as an inward turn (Ricoeur 2006: 102). However, these same books of Judt's also treat of something quite different—the problems of our contemporary Western political community, the economic crisis of welfare states, and the decline of former ideals and social values. As we shall see, the dialectic of the self-conscious entity and the community forms the central point for Judt's final considerations, in which the individual dimension of his thoughts and memory become the foundation for the political testament he wishes to transmit to the Western world.

The illness from which Judt suffered while creating his last texts was incurable and unusually vicious in nature.¹ A person with myopathic lateral sclerosis slowly suffers

¹ ALS—*amyotrophic lateral sclerosis*—is an illness in the group of diseases affecting the motor neurons. Multiple sclerosis or Parkinson's disease, which also belong to this group, are not at all rare, but ALS

increased immobility, becoming dependent on the help of family and nurses. Judt's difficult situation as an invalid tied to his bed led him to believe that in such extreme conditions immersing himself in his own 'I' would maintain his mental alertness and would become something even more—a constantly renewed task, arousing his intellect. A person who unwillingly suffers the torment of immobility remains alone every night with the complexity of his reflections, memories, and desires. The journey that occurs around the labyrinths of his own memory organizes their depths and maintains the identity of the entity. It thus protects the 'I' from the harassing thoughts of disintegration that accompany the illness—the confusion of the senses, and even death, as the ultimate 'loss of consciousness'.

But if you must suffer thus, better to have a well-stocked head: full of recyclable and multipurpose pieces of serviceable recollection, readily available to an analytically disposed mind. All that was missing was a storage cupboard. That I should have been fortunate enough to find this too among the trawlings of a lifetime seems to me close to good fortune (Judt 2010a: Kindle Ed. 226–229).

Judt appears in these words to be close to the Anglo-Saxon tradition of viewing the individuum as that which is identified with the 'person' in general, and at the same time, as a creation of specific work, of the effort of turning toward the self in the act of consciousness. 'Identity and consciousness form a circle', he wrote about the ideas of John Locke, one of the greatest theoreticians of the entity (Paul Ricoeur 2006: 105). Their bond is memory; it is what, as the reflexive projection of the entity, creates biography. In the case of Judt's paradigm of remembrance and biographical writing, the 'I' becomes the object of a kind of care, a responsibility for continued being, a response to the challenge of existence. There is thus a confirmation that 'I am 'I' and that we know who we 'are', or at least we remind ourselves of it. Perhaps there is a certain note of creation in this, although in regard to the postmodernist decline of all identity and narrative, what Tony Judt—a dying historian of the 20th century, a political thinker and essayist of high calibre—wants to tell us forms part of his description of the dramatic struggle to survive. Of course, it is not a matter here of a struggle that could lead to a cure. On this question, Judt has no illusions: 'ALS constitutes progressive imprisonment without parole' (2012b: 23). It is a matter rather of the survival of thoughts and a legacy, the application in culture of the greatest possible quantity of the meanings and values he collected through all his years of life and work—if death is to come, then let it be the death of a responsible individual, who even in its face, acts consciously and deliberately. Perhaps it will seem comical to some that Judt's project, which is slightly grandiose and perhaps illusory, yet bears the mark of being deeply premeditated in terms of technique and based in a tradition of philosophical and mnemonic undertakings. The development of the illness, whose outcome was known from the beginning, left Judt the possibility of using his last years of work to create the testament of a thinker and human being. Judt's three last books, *The Memory Chalet*, *Ill Fares the Land*, and *Thinking the Twentieth Century*,

is distinguished among them by the fact that a sufferer, without losing the sense of feel, gradually loses control of his body, as succeeding motor centres disconnect; difficulties appear with breathing, digesting, and finally even with swallowing and speaking. This last was spared Judt.

which was published at the beginning of 2012 and is the record of an interview by Timothy Snyder, are part of an unbelievably conscious project of departure, full of responsibility and the desire to leave behind a synthetic message, the author's last words on public affairs.

As an attempt to create his own political biography, Judt's project fits into a whole series of reflections on the subject of the individual's social memory. Awareness, consciousness, and 'self-ness' have been considered by many thinkers to be the distinguishing feature of European culture, in the individual, as in the social and political, senses. The coupling of individual and collective factors, as a constitutive moment of shaping identity and culture, basically forms the start of the modern concept of the social entity. This then, from the end of the 18th century—in the period when the Scottish moralists flourished—and in the 19th century, through the first sociological theories of Comte or Tocqueville, set the theoretical framework of sociological reflection. The feedback of individual and social elements, of agency and structure, is a dualism whose ontological reach (despite a much older pedigree) acquired serious significance at the turn of the 19th and 20th century with the development of the Durkheim school, and later, the humanist orientation of German sociology. In this context it is not far to the discovery that the medium distinguishing the connection of the individual and the community, and simultaneously the creation that can be studied at both these levels, is memory. The question of memory as the bearer of the individual and group social identity has been fairly popular in the humanistically oriented social sciences, psychology, and philosophy since the time of Maurice Halbwachs. The modern theory of a 'social construction of memory', which Halbwachs began, is present beginning with the first biographical research of Znaniecki and Thomas, and ending with a great memory boom (ed. Saryusz-Wolska 2009: 7): the renaissance of concepts and issues connected with social and cultural memory that can be observed from at least the 1970s in the USA and Europe (today particularly in East Central Europe, where the lead is taken by Germany, which has for years had the policy of reflecting on the Second World War period and which has a long, solid tradition of humanist sociology).

The question that appears most important and interesting in studies of memory concerns the link between the individual and collective levels—the process of the birth of the entity. Memory is perceived as a field for the clash of individual and personal traits and social influence in a self-referential mechanism of building the social 'I'. This mechanism is reflected in biographical narration. As Judt writes '[...] we are all products of history and carry with us the prejudices and memories of our own lifetimes, and there are occasions when these may be put to some use' (Judt 2012: 395). One of the aims of the present essay is to show this precise constitutive relation between individual and collective memory in Judt's reflections, and the strategy by which the individual (the author of the reflections), in recreating, or perhaps simply in creating, a biographic narrative, at the same time creates a vision of a life of the species to which the individual feels he belongs. Reaching to the supra-individual side of 'I' is in this case to travel to distant social, cultural, and political worlds. The result of the journey, however, is not only the possibility of recreating long-obscured

memories and meanings, memorials of an individual and common past, but also a sort of reconstruction of the birth of contemporaneity. Judt's project is built on the assumption of fragile epistemological foundations: it expresses and adopts the basic dualism in which the 'self-conscious' intellectual, the model entity of modernity, is entangled in describing the reality of which he is a part, in describing the genesis of his own intellectual formation, in opening his own wounds. Why? Because the past, according to Judt, contains the answer to the dilemmas plaguing us today. Judt's voice is, in his conviction, a voice crying in the wilderness, a mnemonic about turn in a culture (it's a matter chiefly of Western culture here) that has reduced memory to a fault, and in consequence has discarded it, as an uncomfortable element, to replace it with an extensive apparatus of forgetting—the free market as a place for the birth of all truths about the human situation.

Not only did we fail to learn very much from the past—this would hardly have been remarkable. But we have become stridently insistent—in our economic calculations, our political practices, our international strategies, even our educational priorities—that *the past has nothing of interest to teach us*. [...] The twentieth century is hardly behind us, but already its quarrels and its dogmas, its ideals and its fears are slipping into the obscurity of mis-memory. Incessantly invoked as "lessons," they are in reality ignored and untaught. This is not altogether surprising. The recent past is the hardest to know and understand (Judt 2008: 2).

The Art of Memory as 'the Culture of the Self'

Using his own memories as carrier and element of the collective memory places Judt's project within the history of the 'art of memory', a field of knowledge which has been developing from ancient times. His aim, however, is not remembering, but recollecting, 'reminding'. For this purpose, he becomes one of the adepts of ancient mnemonic techniques and uses its traditional methods of arranging memories into logical structures so that ever deeper strata of memory may be searched through and organized into a whole. This rather ideal model allows us to understand the past that created us. Judt's mnemonic technique thus has a genealogical aspect, making it possible to discover the roots of the contemporary, defragmented—both in the social and epistemological sense—entity at which it is directed. The art of memory, as Frances Yates claimed, is an integral element of knowledge and the culture of the era, closely related with the birth of scientific method, and later developed along with it. '[...] an art which uses contemporary architecture for its memory places and contemporary imagery for its images will have its classical, Gothic, and Renaissance periods, like the other arts' (Yates 1999: xi). The art of memory developed by Judt in his last books also belongs to his era;² it fits in it in a dual sense—on the one hand, as its self-consciousness, which is the main topic of the present essay, and on the other hand,

² Judt can doubtless not be counted among postmodernist thinkers in the strict sense, that is, one of those who consciously make use of the treatments and claims that can be recognized as close to postmodernism in philosophy, art, or literature. At most, he could be counted with the critics belonging to various derivatives of postmodernism, among which could be numbered in particular various forms of French poststructuralism or American leftist thought. Nor is he a thinker for whom the postmodernist collapse of great narratives and ideas constitutes a point of reference, a necessary issue to be worked out. If, however, we consider postmodernism as an intellectual and cultural phenomenon rather than a historical formation, which—

as its product—it builds palaces of memory as individualized and defragmented as postmodernist thought, which survived the end of the great Enlightenment ideal of absolute order and complete knowledge. They are not necessarily tall glass towers—the miracles of technology and the dreams of 20th-century engineers which long ago replaced the geometrical buildings of the Renaissance; in Judt's case the structure of remembrance rests not on the full splendour of the mental voyage but rather on wandering about a small wooden pension lost in the Swiss Alps, where he spent winter holidays with his parents.

[...] memorizers did not build mere hostelrys or residences in which to house their knowledge: they built palaces. However, I had no desire to construct palaces in my head. [...] But if not a memory palace, why not a memory chalet? [...] Each night, for days, weeks, months, and now well over a year, I have returned to that chalet. [...] chalet transforms itself from a mnemonic trigger to a storage device (Judt 2010a: Kindle Ed. 142–154).

The palace of memory becomes the 'pension of memory', hiding the secrets of life, identity, and death. Each of the identities—Eastern European Jew, Briton, Marxist, historian of the 20th century, defender of liberal values, cosmopolite, and social democrat—hidden in the memories locked in the rooms of the pension culminate in the end in the extreme point of thought, which is death or specifically the consciousness of it, constituting in this case the final point of the biography and the moment of the individual's self-knowledge as an entity immersed in history. The prospect of death is like a reflector shining on the biography, in whose light the complicated identity of the author of the memoirs is visible. In accordance with Maurice Halbwachs' theory, it is composed of many intersecting memories belonging to various social worlds, groups, and environments, and remembering is thus based on adopting one or several trends of collective thinking (Ricoeur 2006: 122).

In his last books, Judt undoubtedly exploits the phenomenon of his own death as an event having its own kind of existential and political character. As an 'impossible' to imagine interruption, a deactivation of the 'I', death for Judt becomes the reference point of his whole life, a catalyzer and prospect in regards to which he is playing the game of memory begun by the entity.³ This is something more than the conscious death of the invalid, it is the fulfilment of the existential project by the thanatic supplement.

Judt's project, although distant in conceptual terms, appears to be a symmetrical complement of the concept of the 'aesthetic of existence' created, in the last years of his life, by Michel Foucault, a thinker belonging to an entirely different tradition than Judt, but who is yet close to him through a kind of 'consciousness' of the necessity of complementing every philosophical work with the aid of the existential element.

without getting entangled in the problem of the historosophical aptness of the term itself—put its stamp on the history of the 20th century, there is no way to conduct a dispute on the subject of changing ideas without referring to this concept, irrespective of how ambivalent, imprecise, or overbroad it may be.

³ What seems startling here is a comparison of Judt's exploitation of the illness and the accompanying prospect of death with Heidegger's 'being towards death', constituting a kind of opening *Dasein* to what is to come, to 'one's *ownmost* and uttermost potentiality-for-Being [...] the possibility of *authentic existence*' (Heidegger 1962: 263).

Judt's intention is similar to Foucault's in so far as it constitutes an equally deliberate enterprise of reconstructing the 'bio-political' biography of a human being and thinker, but is different because it is conducted by a human being who already knows perfectly well that he has not much time left to finish his 'message for the world'. They are linked, however, by close reference to the philosophical tradition of working on oneself, deriving both from the classical period of Greece, and, in particular, from Roman Stoicism at the turn of the millennium (Cicero, Seneca), which Foucault analysed in depth in the last years of his life.⁴

Foucault created an unparalleled methodology of auto-reflection on the entity, devoting both his lectures at the Collège de France in the 1980s to it and his last great works on sexuality in the context of the 'culture of the self' in antiquity and at the beginning of Christianity. His last study and last years of biography testify to the great effort of self-analysis he undertook—a self-analysis conducted on the two above-mentioned levels, the 'I' and culture, the inseparably intertwined aspects of human existence. The Foucauldian attempt to 'free the entity' is also an attempt at problematization—an existential and personal project as well as a voice on the entity *par excellence*—of the genealogy of subjectivization in European culture and a political manifesto of identity understood as transgression, difference, and resistance. 'To interrogate a culture about its limit-experience [...], to question it at the confines of history about a tear that is something like the very birth of its history' (Foucault 2006: xxix).

What, in the endeavour undertaken by the ailing Judt, appears so close to Foucault's prescription of self-knowledge is the assumption that identity is an eternally reproduced and eternally extended process. As Foucault stated, we do not possess one identity. The entity is a set of masks which are born and die in the process of the 'I's contact with the exterior—the entity is difference, relation, power struggles, the eternally renewed efforts of the human being. Further, 'the entity is created' in continual battle between the individual and the mechanisms of production that define it (at the discursive, social, political, etc. level). As a product of the mechanisms of subjectivization and objectification, identity is recreated in the continual struggle of influence and resistance, subjection and a person's own efforts at self-preservation (Foucault 2001: 1453). 'Moral action is indissociable from this forms of self-activity, and they do not differ any less from one morality to another than do the systems of values, rules and interdictions' (Foucault 1990: 28). What links Foucault and Judt is a renewed discovery of the art of existence, which can not be reduced either to ethics or to politics, but constitutes rather a proceeding of an aesthetic order in which the act

⁴ The reference is to the *History of Sexuality*, whose three last volumes, *The Use of Pleasure* (1984), *The Care of the Self* (1984), and the unpublished *Les Aveux de la chair* constituted, on the one hand, the realization of a genealogy of the ancient and early medieval 'technique of the self'—ways of problematizing one's own existence constituting one of the possibilities of the subjectivization of the individual in the Western world—and on the other, a sort of existential project in which Foucault developed a theory of the entity as a game of truth, that is, he studied the technology that formed the contemporary understanding of human existence, trying on this basis to work out an innovative ethic within whose framework the entity, as a being created always in the struggle of various forces (discursive and social, economical, etc.) will be capable of exploiting his selfhood in categories of public intervention, of active influence on reality.

of memory and the act of self-analysis become the conscious medium for recreating the self: the art and craft constituting the entity.

As in the work of a historian, creating a biographical narrative is never solely a reconstruction of the biography, it is also its production. Constructing the transmission on the subject of one's own past is not then a pure record of events, it always has something of a renewed creation of meaning—acquiring the baggage of experience, values, and knowledge, we impose it on events, places, and people of the past. The present as a moment in which we develop our narrative constitutes a type of impassable boundary, a departure point—a reason to remind ourselves of the past, and at the same time an arrival point—a perspective imposed on our narrative and on the constructed biographical transmission. As the German memory researcher, Birgit Neumann, wrote:

In order to create continuity in the time of the 'I' subject to its influence and to present the varied aspects of the identity as unity, a constant reconfiguration and actualized interpretation of one's own history is necessary, from the perspective of the present. Self-narration—in order to pass for an adequate expression of one's own 'I'—has to be judged according to current problems (2009: 261).

Here's a kind of 'politics' of memory and identity. The time of 'now' as the moment founding the past and anticipating at the same time what ensues from it. Therefore too, every historical relation and every individual biography, in order to preserve continuity and homogeneity, is based on the present and creates a whole methodology of 'presentness'. In the final part of his lectures in the years 1981–1982, Foucault described a series of Stoic endeavours, of 'care for the self', whose aim was to give sense to the 'I' and to identify it with the history surrounding it, the roots in one's own biography legitimating the entity of the narration. The perspective the Stoics set, as Judt does later, is death.

The exercise, thinking about death, is only a means for taking this cross-section view of life which enables one to grasp the value of the present, or again to carry out the great loop of memorization, by which one totalizes one's life and reveals it as it is. Judgment on the present and evaluation of the past are carried out in the thought of death, which precisely must not be a thought of the future but rather a thought of myself in the process of dying (Foucault 2005: 480).

Basically, Judt turns around the Stoic principle of rejecting the future on behalf of its anticipation in a 'step back' which he achieves while bound to his bed—he looks to the future, but only in so far as he can exploit his death for it. From the perspective of his past, he tries to analyze 'our contemporary ills' (the subtitle of one of his last books); he immerses himself in the vortex of memories in order to acquire criteria to judge the present. He seeks, for instance, old ideals of democracy and community and tries to connect them with what they have become today, to find their heirs and test whether they have a chance of functioning in a different context. In his case, consideration once again of the intellectual history of Europe and the world in the 20th century is held together in a way by the author's biography itself. History is exploited for the present. As Harald Welzer wrote, 'In this sense, it is rather history that creates its authors than authors their history,' (2009: 43). Basically, however, this process works in both directions: the constructed narrative in fact reconstructs

identity, while identity—as the place for the realization of what is actual⁵—creates the narrative and the history.

Yes, as the work of a historian is not solely the administration of dry facts (even the idea is after all debatable), writing one's own biography—as an element of Foucauldian 'work on the self'—constitutes more than activity intended to transmit one's own memory to posterity; its aims are quite different—closer rather to getting to know the inside of history, to the critical attitude of the analyst. As an aesthetic treatment—to speak Foucault's language—it constitutes a kind of political practice, a participation in public life. This dialectic encompasses not only the individual biographical narrative, but also concerns the work of a professional historian. It is not possible to throw off all perspective and adopt the position of a researcher-outsider, and moreover, as Judt himself states, it would be both unnecessary and harmful.

An historian (or anyone else for that matter) without convictions is not particularly interesting and it might be rather odd if the author of a book devoted to his times omitted his bright ideas on the subject of the people and ideas that dominated them. [...]In my own case, both in *Postwar* and in more recent memoiristic writings, I have taken care to ground my perspective in my time and place of birth—my education, family, class and generation. None of these should be construed as an explanation much less an apology for distinctive interpretations; they are there to provide the reader with a means of assessing and contextualizing them (Judt 2012: 396).

The work of a historian of contemporaneity and his biography are closely related to one another; the reduction of one's own knowledge and convictions should be here solely the means to an end, not a fetish. If Judt falls within the Lockean tradition, as I mentioned at the beginning, it is in so far as he is aware of the fact that the slate of our memory (Locke's *tabula*), in the methodological sense, can not and should not remain empty. Only memory is the key to understanding our—contemporary—selves, and in consequence, only a conscious memory directs us toward affirmation of a new, emerging manner of life (including, or perhaps primarily, collective)—one which is both inevitable and which we help to create. Memory is thus creation.

A Biopolitical Biography

Judt's last books are a startling—and thus doubtless to many academic specialists of politics and modern history a bit too generalized and bold—synthesis of topics connected with individual, intellectual, social (or perhaps more precisely generational), and political biography. All these dimensions are interwoven to such a degree that it is hard sometimes to differentiate the opinions expressed by Judt the private person and Judt the intellectual and historian. If we want to find some order in this tangle of topics, memories, historical analyses, and opinions on subjects so seemingly trivial as his father's 'obsession' with cars or changing culinary habits in 1960s England, it should be observed at once that, in the chronological and substantive sense (the choice of topics considered in the sphere of contemporary history), the social and political aspects of Judt's reflections are partly subordinated to his personal biography. This

⁵ In this sense, though, identity is always a kind of politics.

he reveals in such a manner as to extract its entanglement in the ideological, social, and political history of Europe and the USA (his two ‘fatherlands’). And therefore, his personal memories also form a kind of historical narrative, containing all the basic subjects that have previously engaged him as an author. In spite of his illness, he does not abandon his profession; while losing the possibility of increasing his knowledge through active study and reading, he continues to reflect, constructing a synthetic picture drawn from his own memory (*The Memory Chalet*), his historical and political knowledge (*Ill Fares the Land*), and discussion (*Thinking the Twentieth Century*).

In earlier days I might have envisaged myself as a literary Gepetto, building little Pinocchios of assertion and evidence, given life by the plausibility of their logical construction [...]. But my latest writings have a far more inductive quality to them. Their value rests on an essentially impressionistic effect: the success with which I have related and interwoven the private and the public, the reasoned and the intuited, the recalled and the felt (Judt 2010a: Kindle Ed. 199–202).

The subjects undertaken by Judt reflect to a certain degree the complexity of the family and personal history of this man who was only seemingly a fully ‘Western’ intellectual. He came from a family of Jewish immigrants from East Central Europe. His father, a moderate socialist, who learned English only as he grew up, remained faithful to Continental culture. His mother, however, was much more under the influence of the British way of life (*Ibidem*: 38–39). The family roots meant that Judt was condemned to be multicultural. His origins gave the lie to clear and hackneyed cultural schemas. As he himself points out, in this connection, questioning the obvious was written into his upbringing; perhaps it pushed him later toward work as a historian, a searcher after the roots of contemporaneity. In spite of the leftist views prevailing in his closest family, ‘it was always understood, at home, that Soviet communism was not Marxism, and that the Soviet communists, from Stalin onwards in any case, were thus not proper Marxists’ (Judt 2012: 77). This lesson, which later, during his work in France, permitted him quickly to reject the illusions and fascinations of Continental intellectuals with the Soviet political model, he thus took from home and it remained the basic trait of his creativity to the end of his intellectual work. From the beginning, he had the sense of contradicting simple explanations, obvious answers, and large projects. As a young person, he worked ardently for several years in one of the Israeli kibbutzim, believing in the cooperative utopia, but the belief quickly evaporated when, on travelling to England for his higher studies, he was ostracized by the conservative society of the kibbutz. This lesson, like many others in the future—study in Cambridge, France, work with dissidents in Eastern Europe (Jan Gross and Irena Grudzińska-Gross, Barbara Toruńczyk, and Aleksandr Smolar)—permitted Judt to take on succeeding aporetic incarnations: apologist and critic of the Zionist project in Israel, Marxist critic of the 1960s youth movement, and historian sensitive to the question of Eastern Europe but without unnecessary sentiment and indulgence for its difficult history. In fact every one of these faces was one of Judt’s identities, though none was the real one. Thus the problem of identity was always a sort of trap, an attempt at classification, the forcing of an ethnic, political, or religious existence into an exterior mould. What mattered to him was only the play of identities, the attitude of a cosmopolitan intellectual, a citizen of the world, who was after all at

home everywhere and in reality at home nowhere. ‘I was—and remain—suspicious of identity politics in all forms, Jewish above all’ (Judt 2010a: Kindle Ed. 991).

The fragmented identity characterizing his own biography became then, at the end of Judt’s life, excellent material on the basis of which, in the hermeneutic intent linking the micro level of individual memory with the macro level of 20th-century European history, he decided to diagnose the origins of the processes that led to the great transformations of the 20th century. The purpose behind this methodology is part of the broader project to which he devoted his magnum opus *Postwar*. It was an attempt to outline the logic and dynamics of the process responsible for the arising of the socio-political and cultural situation we are experiencing at the beginning of the 21st century: a genealogical work of reconstructing our identity oscillating between downfall and survival, disintegration and integrality. In the case of Europe, affected by the cataclysm of the Second World War, the near past is the key to understanding contemporaneity, because dramatic events, whose sources have been obviated, still haunt memory and shape identity for a long time after.

Europe is not re-entering its troubled wartime past—on the contrary, it is leaving it. [...] But this does not mean that it is being drawn *back* into it. For that history never went away. As this book tries to show, the long shadow of World War Two lay heavy across postwar history (Judt 2005: 10).

This is the source of the main topic of Judt’s last books—the downfall and reintegration of all the social and cultural orders that produced the emergence of total ideologies not suffering contradiction. Zionism, Marxism, and today liberalism—each separately and each in an absolute manner—seemed for a long time to be an untouchable basis for a new social life, an open gate to the kingdom of light. According to Judt, the blind preoccupation of 20th-century thinkers and politicians with this light more than once induced them to place the abstract existence of the idea above the happiness of individuals and nations, to subordinate the world to alleged laws of history (Marxism) or the natural law of social life (liberalism):

[...] to authorize the suffering of others in the name of that same unverifiable hypothesis. This, in my view, is the intellectual sin of the century: passing judgment on the fate of others in the name of their future as you see it, a future in which you may have no investment, but concerning which you claim exclusive and perfect information (Judt 2012: 91).

From this perspective, various radical models for rebuilding society and the state, originating in Marxism, as well as national utopias involving the rebirth of former glory—on the one hand fascism and on the other Zionism, but also the contemporary liberal utopia based on claims about the primary role of the market in shaping social relations—have common roots in 18th-century dreams about ordering the world. A world in which idea and reality meet in the rational activity of man. Judt’s biography is, according to him, an excellent example of how the 20th-century cataclysm begun by the First World War and the downfall of the old Continental order of European powers forced millions of persons (including many intellectuals) to emigrate in search of a better life and to construct new models of social life, which were to prevent future social disintegration and loss of roots. His ancestors, wandering earlier about Europe,

arrived in England in search of a safe haven: they were amongst those Jews to whom it was not given to live quietly in their own homelands—in Poland, Lithuania, Galicia, or Romania.

Mass society posed new and dangerous challenges: not only were Jews now a serviceable political target, but they were losing the increasingly ineffectual protection of the royal or imperial figurehead. In order to survive this turbulent transition, European Jews had either to disappear altogether or else change the rules of the political game (*Ibidem*: 19).

For many of them, use of ideology became a weapon that could validate their existence and identity or cause that identity to cease to be necessary. After the First World War, for many Jews from the territories of East Central Europe left solitary by the downfall of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy (as for many other orphans of the k.k. monarchy), the only salvation in a world where they had suddenly—in spite of earlier assimilation—become foreigners, was to spread the idea of freedom and emancipation in such a manner that they too would have access to them, cause them to lose their national legitimation and to acquire universal value. This was one of the reasons for the association of many Jewish circles with leftist movements. The second, however, was the danger threatening them from the growing strength of nationalist and chauvinist authoritarianism, which was also born as a fulfilment of the cultural and economic vacuums left when the *anciens régimes* were gone. This had other effects in the ideological sphere as well. As Judt observes (2010), for a segment of Eastern European intellectuals—Ludwig von Mises, Karl Popper, Friedrich von Hayek, Joseph Schumpeter, or Peter Drucker, and others—some of whom had Jewish roots, Marxist or socialist thinking was unacceptable for two reasons: on the one hand, it threatened totalitarianism on the Soviet model, and on the other, there was the impotency of the planned economy, which was linked with the downfall of their multicultural homeland of Austro-Hungary. It was they who later became the chaplains of extreme liberalism.

Opposition, or specifically the difficult and unpredictable relation of Marxism and liberalism, understood as a total vision of reality, seems to Judt the constitutive antagonism of the entire 20th century, which, contrary to appearances, was not broken by the postmodernist collapse of ideology. ‘History is on your side’ (Judt 2012: 81)—this sentence might have been expressed by a liberal as well, believing like an old-school Marxist convinced of the power of rational planning, that the market, freed from its shackles, is capable of keeping history in the post-democratic world of consumption.

Running his mind through the corridors and rooms of the Alpine pension of his memory, Judt remembers his engagement on behalf of great ideas—Marxism, Zionism, and liberalism, revealing at the same time the path of an intellectual breaking loose from succeeding forms of blindness in its original sense—the loss of the ability to see things in their irreducible ambivalence and abandonment of the awareness that every intellectual choice carries with it political effects as well. The connection between ideas and reality, universality and particularism is itself the chief 20th-century ideology, occupying great minds, which have more than once been deceived by that false dialectic: how to transform ideas into action, how to create the world as an active

entity while remaining at the same time objective in the sphere of knowledge, and what is the role of the political intellectual? ‘This is the power of ideas’, Judt would doubtless have said: the subordination of political practice means that thought and power (as the 20th century proved more than once) become inseparable elements in a game in which—to use the words of Gilles Deleuze, a philosopher whom Judt did not particularly esteem—‘Only thought is capable of inventing the fiction of a State that is universal by right, of elevating the State to the level of de jure universality’ (Deleuze, Guattari 2007: 414). This too is why the main principle for Judt is a healthy scepticism and a continual effort to question—characteristics of a critical humanist-historian, for whom the way is the future, and of a politician, mindful of history. ‘If we are to understand the world whence we have just emerged, we need to remind ourselves of the power of ideas’ (Judt 2008: 15). These words could have been said by the above-cited French poststructuralists Foucault or Deleuze, or by Leszek Kołakowski, a Polish thinker known to Judt, whose path from young apologist for communism in the People’s Republic of Poland to ‘conservative-liberal socialist’ he knew even too well...It was Kołakowski who wrote, after all, the words that were so important to the later generation of the opposition in Poland (Kuroń, Michnik, or Modzelewski): philosophy is the ‘effort continually to question everything self-evident, and thus a continual disavowal of existing revelations’ (Kołakowski). Nor can the philosopher run away from the past in the technical sense. Judt, like Kołakowski, was perfectly aware that a philosopher is, obviously, also a historian and a person; he is after all the creation of his times and social situation. Paradoxically, his participation in social life allows him to move beyond it, constituting the value of his genealogical and demasking work in the process not so much of carrying the social basis of the entity itself as exploiting it as a ‘specific universality’. Disavowing universals does not consist thus in destroying them, but is rather closer to working through them. Therefore too, in the case of the researcher of the past, his own biography is so important—a medium allowing historical knowledge to be located in the perspective of the present, and in consequence permitting practical use to be made of it—for politics.

Old Illusions and New Politics

The prospect of rapidly approaching death forced Judt to formulate, without delay, something that not many intellectuals were capable of: a critical but at the same time positive political programme. Critical, because directed against the self-evidences of our present manner of life, and positive because it provided a kind of political therapy. The roots of this project should be sought in genealogical work—a backward look allowing us to see our ‘now’ as the result of a long-term and not at all unavoidable process.

The first words of one of Judt’s last three books, *Ill Fares the Land*, contains a very important rhetoric device, which, it emerges, is the result of the work of memory and self-analysis by which Judt, relying solely on the knowledge acquired before his illness, legitimizes his cognitive limitations by transferring arguments based in his

own biography into the collective sphere. The majority of arguments of a general nature are written using the plural; thus in referring to the community in which he participates, he writes 'we'. In this manner, he permits himself a slightly preceptorial tone, the tone of a person departing, who wants to leave a testament behind him; it is at the same time the tone of a perceptive observer of the political world and a concerned participant in collective life.

Something is profoundly wrong with the way we live today. [...] We know what things cost but have no idea what they are worth. We no longer ask of a judicial ruling or a legislative act: is it good? Is it fair? Is it just? Is it right? Will it help bring about a better society or a better world? Those used to be *the* political questions, even if they invited no easy answers. We must learn once again to pose them (Judt 2010: 1).

This admittedly rather dramatic and slightly too exalted introduction is only seemingly the cry of a person on his deathbed, who, in a desperate attempt to give meaning to himself, calls for a radical rebuilding of society. Nothing could be more mistaken. Judt is excellently well aware of the pathos of his tone. It is a deliberate treatment intended to make us aware that the contemporary world, although it is not threatened to the same degree as it has been in the past by the laying of freedom and life on the altar of higher aims, is also affected by a kind of blindness leading it in the direction of impotent political thinking and in consequence the possibility of moving toward totalitarianism. At the threshold of the 21st century, Western society has again submitted itself to the dictates of one guiding idea, which, after years of prosperity and proper functioning in the economic sphere, has become the unquestioned determinant of social life, a self-evident truth recognized by many as the greatest discovery of Western social and economic thought—the market understood as humanity's final and only natural environment, where not only economic interests are produced but also true interpersonal relations. The market comprehended as the obvious playing field of actors conscious of their interests and as an epistemological boundary only beyond which are we able to perceive what is true and what is merely appearance, what is useful, and what not, or in what manner matter is rationally connected with thought.

In this context, Judt both cites contemporary neoliberal theory of the 'Austrian' school and permits himself a criticism of the post-war leftists who gave way rather too easily to the temptation of separating the economy and the state, thereby causing the public sphere—a place for realization of the social interest (in the economic sense as well) and the private sphere—the area for the activity of the individual entity—to become one. The result was the mixing of two rationales, whose relations—previously constituting a rather negotiable question—were brought into the common mechanism of a universal truth seeing the ontological side of social life in completely free market competition. The citizen, formerly a sovereign entity of the state, and the consumer, the entity of market play, became one, while the perspective of economic usefulness and profitability became the one criterion for judging the functioning of the community. History has come full circle and stood still because—as Judt claims—we do not know how to think outside the economic model; it has become the sole essence of our activity, sucking all potential contention and emancipation from the political

sphere. Has it always been thus? ‘Thinking ‘economistically’, as we have done now for thirty years, is not intrinsic to humans. There was a time when we ordered our lives differently’ (*Ibidem*: 39).

Criticism of the economic paradigm of contemporary politics brings Judt closer to thinkers of another provenance, coming from the circle of poststructuralist French leftists, whom he criticized or, at least, did not respect. His criticism leads, basically, to the same schema, which as the distant outcome of Heidegger’s thought, was developed first by Deleuze or Foucault, and later by Jacques Rancière. It leads to the demonstration that the contemporary political discourse governing Western democracies has lost in practice its ability to emancipate, succumbing to a specific ideology of freedom and individual sovereignty as the bases of society. Society is understood in these discourses as a place for realizing goals that are not at all ‘social’; it is rather a field where individuals play against one another in the cruel game of financial interests—the market. This version of politics leads to the technology of management and the increase of productivity. In reducing politicality thus to the properties of the monad-rational actor (the model propagated by the neoliberal Chicago School) Western democracies are basically losing sight of it; they are not asking any more ‘political questions’, because these appear now as questions of managing the choices of millions of consumers, and remain literally ‘outside’ the polis *idiotes*—the set of individuals in the postmodern world of arrested history. Society—as Rancière claims—is reduced to the market, whose personification is the ‘middle class’ (*Rancière 2010: 31–32*), constituting the ideal community of *homo economicus*, of producers and consumers.

In this—fairly unexpected—company, Judt becomes one of the tribunes of a ‘new social affair’, whose supporters, in regard to the economic crisis, and the earlier crisis of legitimation that affected the Western system, we find on various sides of the political scene. Beginning with the earlier attempt to resolve the problem of social justice by the liberal John Rawls, a communitarian, poststructuralists, who like Foucault cried out that ‘society must be protected!’, or contemporary analysts such as the British conservative Jesse Norman, author of books constituting the political basis for the government of Prime Minister David Cameron (2010), or Will Hutton, the leftist-liberal commentator from the think-tank Work Foundation (2010)—all these, in spite of their great differences, would doubtless agree with Judt’s opinion:

We too readily assume that the defining feature of modernity is the individual: the non-reducible subject, the freestanding person, the unbound self, the un-beholden citizen. [...] However, what is truly distinctive about modern life is not the unattached individual. It is society. More precisely civil—or (as the 19th century had it) bourgeois—society (*Judt 2010: 214*).

The relation then between the individual and society, private and public, consumer and citizen, constitutes the centre of the discursive impasse in which our political culture has found itself at the threshold of the 21st century. Thinking through this relation means taking a closer look at the foundations of our thinking to this period and turning to the times when it was formulated—when today’s obligatory divisions were constituted. Judt, as a purebred sceptic, knew that we could do that only through a retrospective analysis, whose method is the history of the 19th and

20th centuries—the period of the rise and fall of ideology. It is not a matter, however, of the straight recreation of the—doubtless dear to him and already tried—ideals of a social democratic society. It is rather a matter of their reworking, of discovering the lacunae that caused their potential to be exhausted, a vivisection of what, for democracy and the democratically oriented leftist, is most valued and obvious at the same time: equality, that great unstable value, which if misunderstood leads to tyranny—as Toqueville warns—but without which an open society and a prosperous state can not be built. Without a democratic policy of equality the community does not function and without the community, society is reduced to an arrhythmic collection of units, atoms separated by the confident idea of individualism.

Death as the Horizon of Politicality

Marci Shore, in commenting on the criticism levelled by Judt at French intellectuals in *The Burden of Responsibility* finds a personal motif—Judt's settling of accounts with the French fascination for Soviet communism becomes his own expiation of the 'sins' of youth, as he sees them in 'looking back'.

This book is Tony's settlement with himself in that context. In the story of Sartre's talks with his French comrade can be read the story of his own talks with Polish friends [...]. Between the lines of *Past Imperfect* is the story of its author—and of what Eastern Europe began to mean for him (Shore 2012: 8).

Looking at this part of Europe allowed him to perceive in an entirely different light many of the sterile disputes conducted in the West and in which he had previously been engaged: that 'in 1968, history was created rather in Warsaw and Prague than in Paris' (*Ibidem*: 7).

Returning and referring to his past was not then in Judt's work a new motif that appeared at the end of his life—it would even be tempting to claim that it had the nature of an internal imperative of his historical research and thinking in general. This imperative consisted perhaps in the reconstructing of his own, ambiguous identity though a genealogy of 'the century of the intellectual' (to use his term—2008: 12), which created many such dismembered biographies.

Looking at history through one's own person is not an easy challenge and it is not a matter here of overestimating one's memory and person, as one might be accused of doing. Placing oneself at the centre of historical events while simultaneously basing oneself on one's individual biography requires knowledge, self-awareness, and self-criticism; it requires, however, also a kind of 'healthy egocentrism' which assures us that what we have to transmit, in spite of the difficulties connected with disease, is worthy of even the greatest physical and intellectual effort.

In Judt's memory, the biography of the individual and its historical-social context—individual memory and collective memory—cross. The place where it comes to a meeting of both these mnemonic areas is invoked often in *The Memory Chalet*: Switzerland, where the author spent many happy moments in childhood. As a country in which he rediscovered Europe's lost dream of undisturbed order, a place where

ideas are not too large to be realized, and the individual and community find enough space for one another not to disturb each other, Switzerland unites, in Judt's memory, his person with the history embodied in great and small events and persons. 'Switzerland is a striking instance of the possibilities—and, therefore, the benefits—of blended identities' (Judt 2010a: Kindle Ed. 2153–2154). With an identity whose existence is the working out and affirmation of contrasts both in high politics—model democratic traditions—and ordinary everyday life, Switzerland is 'efficient, but provincial; beautiful but bland; hospitable but charmless [...]' (Ibidem: Kindle Ed. 2157). This small mountain country with its diverse people who yet act for the common good is the essence of Judt's unfulfilled social-democratic longings: the realization of dreams of simplicity and innovativeness in one, a place where private and public are so well entwined that neither—to make use once again of Tocqueville's language—have given rise to too much individualism or to tyranny.

There is one more thing that confirms for Judt this perhaps too idyllic vision of the Alpine country—Swiss railroads, the archetype of railways in general. Judt's interest in trains is not solely of the nature of a private passion. He does in fact write: 'I love trains, and they have always loved me back' (Ibidem: Kindle Ed. 678), but it is a matter of something more than a personal feeling of charm with a miracle of technology, which is today rather old-fashioned, and, in comparison with flying, fairly ineffective. From a fascination with trains, a sphere of community is again reborn, which Judt, combing through his long forgotten memories, combines with the social and political context—railway lines are something more than just a sociological cross section of the human collective. 'Railways remain the necessary and natural accompaniment to the emergence of civil society. They are a collective project for individual benefit' (Judt 2010: 215), a place in which private and public approach each other as nowhere else. They are also a sphere of struggle, in which negative aspects, contrary logic, and ideas of modernity—privatization and nationalization, social inclusion and exclusion—clash. On the one hand, they are a symbol of the already departing idea of modernity, and on the other they are not aging, but adapting to new times and new needs. 'Thus to travel in Switzerland is to understand the ways in which efficiency and tradition can seamlessly blend to social advantage' (Judt 2010a: Kindle Ed. 727–728).

Such a Switzerland returns in 'daydreams', by whose help Judt, chained to his bed, travels into the past, to extract from it his own history and the history of the 20th century—a place that, in spite of its vulnerability to modernization, remains eternally the same, where the newest technology combines with a traditional manner of life, clothing, and architecture, as if suspended in time. Remembering Switzerland with its stability, simplicity, and regularity has something of the longing for a teleological and predictable world, a return toward the One, in a non-existence far from all unexpected changes and transformations. 'Nothing happens: it is the happiest place in the world. We cannot choose where we start out in life, but we may finish where we will. I know where I shall be: going nowhere in particular on that little train, forever and ever' (Ibidem: Kindle Ed. 2210–2211). Switzerland as a 'palace of memory' in whose corridors we find long-lost ideals and values—equality, participation, redistribution—protected from the free market logic that appropriates everything. Possibly this is only

a naïve nostalgia for a lost past, but if Walter Benjamin—another intellectual of the ‘great identity’—was right in writing that ‘The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption’ (Benjamin 2006: 390), it could emerge that the strength of true emancipation lies precisely in what is past, lost, and condemned to be forgotten. As a moment of confrontation with all of this, death therefore also has a political dimension.

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Biographical Note: Bartłomiej Blesznowski—historian of ideas and sociologist of knowledge, researcher in the Institute of Applied Social Sciences University of Warsaw, laureate of Florian Znaniecki Prize Polish Sociological Association. In his research deals with issues of power and politics in contemporary society, combining social science with philosophy. He is the author of *Batalia o człowieka. Genealogia władzy Michela Foucaulta jako próba wyzwolenia podmiotu* [Battle for Man. Michel Foucault's Genealogy of Power as Attempted Liberation of Entity] (Warszawa 2009).

E-mail: blesznowski@gmail.com