

**Sunday Book Review**

# Tony Judt's 'When the Facts Change'

By SAMUEL MOYNJAN. 16, 2015



Tony Judt Credit Illustration by Joe Ciardiello

“The arc is down,” is how Jennifer Homans, the widow of Tony Judt and an eminent dance critic and historian, describes the age of cruel disappointment that followed the end of the Cold War. It was the era in which her husband was condemned to live out his last two decades before his untimely death at age 62 in 2010.

This new and presumably last of Judt’s collections of scintillating journalism runs the gamut of his interests, organized so the reader can relive that downward arc in his company. “When the Facts

Change” ranges from the excitement of 1989 through the agonies of post-9/11 foreign policy to our parlous domestic circumstances after the financial crash. It also includes some of the pen portraits for which Judt was deservedly famous. Taken together, these essays also paint his own portrait.

In 1989, Judt was still a little-known chronicler of the French left. Descended from East European Jewry and raised in England before moving to New York, he soon finished “Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956,” which became his most prominent book in his original field. Its blistering outrage toward Jean-Paul Sartre and others who threw in their lot with Cold War Communism made Judt controversial, especially in leftist circles, though he must have known that opposing bad old choices hardly ruled out making brand new mistakes.

Then Judt pivoted. He had flirted with consigning public intellectuals of Sartre’s stripe to the dustbin of history, but now he was turning himself into one. He also met and married Homans, who has artfully curated this collection of his essays.

From his post at The New York Review of Books, where he first wrote in 1993 and ultimately became one of its most frequent contributors, Judt swept aside some of his old assumptions and faced new realities lucidly, transforming himself from a scourge of Communism into a critic of American empire. This collection is a reminder of Judt’s clear mind and prose and, as Homans says in her lovely introduction, his fidelity to hard facts and to honest appraisals of the modern scene.

One reality Judt called out was the post-9/11 shock of perpetual war, rather than perpetual peace. Judt likens America’s aggressive war on terror to the S.U.V. beloved of its citizens — an indulgent “anachronism” in a “crowded world” — and America’s foreign policy to “just an oversized pickup truck with too much power.” (A better means of transportation, Judt thought, were trains, which modern Americans refused to build — or ride — but which he considered the hallmark of European civilization at its best.) Americans had earned praise for their beneficence but foolishly squandered it, Judt concludes, forgetting “a little too quickly that for an empire to be born, a republic has first to die.”

Then there was Israel. Judt’s bombshell essay, “Israel: The Alternative,” published in 2003 in The New York Review of Books and reprinted here, was a turning point in the history of American opinion on a complex topic. Like the S.U.V., Judt concludes, Israel is also an anachronism, though he had been an ardent youthful Zionist and worked as a translator during the Six-Day War of 1967. Diagnosing the limits of the two-state solution that had long monopolized public debate about the Middle East, Judt’s essay brought a storm of fury down on him, changed the boundaries of acceptable discourse and lost him friends.

Yet today even his enemies miss him. “The war of ideas is not what it used to be,” one of them, Leon Wieseltier, lamented when contemplating the debate about the Middle East — and the rather unimpressive row of adversaries left to tangle with after Judt’s passing. At the time he wrote this, in 2013, Wieseltier was the literary editor of The New Republic, which he recently left. Judt, too, had been affiliated with The New Republic — as a contributing editor — but his name was removed from

the magazine's masthead after his Israel article appeared.

For a partisan, Judt was not prickly at all. I knew him slightly; after I charged him in *The Nation* with contradicting himself over the years, he characteristically befriended me. But first he wrote a letter to the editor addressing my allegation. "When the facts change, I change my mind," he remarked. "What do you do?" A version of this comment is commonly attributed to one of Judt's heroes, John Maynard Keynes (though Homans writes that "Tony did not really have heroes"). It now finds itself the title of this collection, thanks to Judt's elder son, Daniel, Homans reports.

During his frantic, final bout of intellectual activism around the time of his diagnosis with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, Lou Gehrig's disease, Judt threw in his lot with social democracy. In his masterpiece "Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945," Judt chronicled how the welfare state had come to its European homeland. And in the face of contemporary market fundamentalism, he protests here that he is a conservative, husbanding the achievements of the Cold War. It is the libertarians who are the radicals. Fear, he insists, the fear of rising insecurity, should motivate us to retain our welfarist birthright.

The redistributive politics of the European welfare state had themselves been based on a fear of the weakness of liberal institutions. "A social democracy of fear is something to fight for," Judt tells us. But the fear that once inspired justice also involved the internal threat of the working class and the external threat of the Soviets, and the task now is to figure out how to provide a functional equivalent of those fears without incurring their historically stupendous costs. Nostalgia was forgivable in a dying man, but the truth is that the European welfare state as it emerged after World War II cannot be rehabilitated. It was faulty in its time, leading to its own undoing, and cannot now be turned into a global fix. Among other things, it tended to confirm worldwide hierarchies in wealth (though moderating them for a few decades in North Atlantic countries).

Those who miss Judt's invigorating role, even when they disagree with him, can find a piece here on options in the Middle East that Homans included even though Judt ultimately chose not to publish it. It is inconclusive. "It ought not to be beyond the intelligence of even the most hidebound local politicians to see the benefits of imaginative compromise," Judt says. Yet so far, it has been. Like Judt's moving elegy for social democracy, his writings on Israel show he was much better at posing vexing problems, and bringing them early and exigently before a wide public, than he was at finding solutions. But that can be said to be the intellectual's proper role. And, after all, we are still living in the era Judt so courageously challenged for betraying the promises it might have kept.

Ours remains an era of forever war, one that both American liberals and conservatives agree to go on fighting, while restricting their wrangling to how best to justify it legally. In the Middle East, the "peace process," itself little more than a euphemism for repetitive violence, is widely considered dead, even by many former supporters, but with no feasible alternative in sight. And a Frenchman Judt would have lauded, Thomas Piketty, has demonstrated that we live in a time of galloping inequality that our leaders choose not to correct. Even Barack Obama, Judt says, is "someone who would concede rather than confront — and that's a shortcoming in a politician, if not in a man."

If the arc is down, those who miss Judt cannot take solace in the thought that it will someday bend toward justice. The facts have not changed enough. No wonder this book, and Judt's assumption of the role of political critic after the Cold War, remain so relevant.

WHEN THE FACTS CHANGE

Essays, 1995-2010

By Tony Judt

Edited and introduced by Jennifer Homans

386 pp. Penguin Press. \$29.95.

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