

# Briefly Noted

*Thinking the Twentieth Century*, Tony Judt with Timothy Snyder (United States: Penguin Books, 2013), 432 pp., \$36 cloth, \$18 paper.

doi:10.1017/S0892679413000130

This is an extraordinary book by two extraordinary thinkers. Diagnosed with a terminal illness that made the use of his hands impossible, the eminent historian and public intellectual Tony Judt agreed to an unusual project: a series of free-flowing conversations with fellow historian Timothy Snyder, organized topically around areas of mutual interest, such as the intellectual history of twentieth-century Europe and the history of and future prospects for social democracy in Europe and North America. Snyder, whose groundbreaking 2010 book *Bloodlands* established him as one of the most important historians of European history working in the English language, serves as the interlocutor here, encouraging (and at times nudging) Judt to expand upon many of the themes of his earlier books and essays, such as *Reappraisals*, *Ill Fares the Land*, and the monumental *Postwar*.

The book also serves as an intellectual biography of sorts: each chapter begins with Judt's account of an important period of his professional and personal life, which then serves as an entrée into that chapter's topic. This allows us to really grasp how Judt's thought was conditioned by his upbringing—for instance, his biographical recounting of his childhood in a secular

socialist Jewish family in 1950s London feeds into his discussion of early twentieth century Central European (and especially Viennese) Jewish thinkers, and we see how his erstwhile Zionist commitments (Judt spent a significant time in his adolescence on a socialist Kibbutz in northern Israel) informed his critique of current Israeli policies and his eventual embrace of a “one-state solution.”

It is difficult to summarize the breadth of the topics discussed in *Thinking the Twentieth Century*. Judt transitions seamlessly from one disparate area to the next, proving he is as equally fluent in discussing interwar trends in thinking in international political economy as he is in critiquing Rawlsian social contractarianism; in exploring the history of Marxism in twentieth-century France as he is in describing the peculiar place of Poland in European history and consciousness; and in eviscerating market-obsessed pathologies in the United States as he is in recounting the divergent intellectual histories of German, Italian, and Romanian fascism. A testament to the value of ecumenicalism and interdisciplinary inquiry, *Thinking the Twentieth Century* is a celebration of the life of the mind, well lived.

*Ethics & International Affairs*, 27, no. 2 (2013), pp. 231–232.

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