

*Ill Fares the Land: A Treatise on our
Present Discontents*
by Tony Judt

London: Allen Lane, 2010
(ISBN: 978-1-8461-3459-5). 256pp.

James Kearney (University of Glasgow)

In his penultimate publication, *Ill Fares the Land*, Tony Judt emotively proclaims that '[s]omething is profoundly wrong with the way we live today' (p.1). So begins an analysis of the failings of Western (specifically US and UK) governments to provide adequately for their citizens, mapping the cultural and economic factors which lead them to embrace the cult of private wealth to the detriment of those most in need of state intervention. Judt, a British born émigré who lived in America, was a respected historian, essayist and voice of the Left best known for his seminal *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (2005) died in 2010. As we would expect then, history weighs heavily upon much of Judt's writing and this book is no different. However, *Ill Fares the Land* has a decidedly more political agenda, one in which Judt sheds the label of professional historian for an altogether more polemical authorial voice.

He begins his spirited tract by outlining the political decisions, and the subsequent cultivation of an ideology, which favoured private wealth over the collective good. The cult of private wealth and the liquidation of publicly owned services, beginning in Britain during the Thatcher years, is, Judt argues, what has given rise to the social deprivation which has become all too prevalent in contemporary Britain. Judt comments upon the concerning

correlation between one's income and its effect on quality of life, a rather slippery term that is once again beginning to rear its head in contemporary British political discourse. What matters most in a healthy and thriving society, he argues, is not the aggregate wealth of a given nation, but the manner in which it is spread out. If we fail to recognise the wisdom of this axiomatic statement, our path to a more equitable society will be a long one indeed.

Inequality is corrosive. It rots societies from within [...] people feel a growing sense of superiority (or inferiority) based on their possessions; prejudice towards those on the lower ranks of the social ladder hardens; crime spikes and the pathologies of social disadvantage become more marked. The legacy of unregulated wealth creation is bitter indeed (p.21).

What, then, is needed to initiate a reversal of the social ills the author outlines? First, he argues, we must distance ourselves from the misleading belief that economic growth is the sure way of alleviating inequality, based upon the unfounded premise that increased GDP leads to a similar increase in capital for those suffering economic hardship. All the evidence, he notes, points to the contrary. What Judt is hinting at is a departure from viewing the cultivation of great personal wealth as our primary goal in life. In its place, paying homage to Adam Smith, Judt encourages a re-assessment of our moral sentiments regarding those less privileged members of society.

[R]estoring pride and self respect in society's losers was a central platform in the social reforms that marked 20th century progress. Today we have once again turned our back on them (p.27).

In order to do so, Judt argues, we must be more willing to embrace the welfare state as a viable means of improving society for all, as well

as advocating a degree of moral responsibility when considering those less privileged members of society.

Convincing a critical readership that a return of the welfare state is the most effective means of creating a fairer society is, one would suspect, Judt's biggest hurdle. In the US, his adoptive country, any mention of increased state intervention not only smacks of socialism but is downright unconstitutional. In order to impress the important, and positive, role the state can play in peoples lives, Judt outlines the historical context which facilitated the creation of the welfare state post-1945 (the need for a stable government which could provide universal services for a worn out nation), and is especially fond of the Social Democratic movement that gained widespread support in Scandinavian countries. Social Democracy, he explains 'blended socialist dreams of a post-capitalist utopia with practical recognition of the need to live and work in a capitalist world' as well as accepting the 'rules of the democratic game' (p.73). Judt champions a politics which recognises the need for a regulated free market economy which does not intervene with the state and those people who comprise it. However, we are not living in post-war Europe, and although the problems of contemporary society are real enough, the historical argument in support for his method of solving them takes on a slightly anachronistic air, leaving it open to questions of pertinence. Similarly, Judt is anxious to address the distant Communist connotations inherent in the ideology he espouses (p.144-51), a real hurdle if his argument is to be accepted, and takes time to acknowledge the negative impact authoritarian Communism has had upon those wishing to espouse increased state intervention in the West. Indeed, Judt acknowledges that in the aftermath of the 'euphoric delusions of post-[19]89' Europe, social

democracy has lost its 'ideological narrative', and one feels that it is this problem Judt wishes to address here, before the benefits of social democracy, which are, in the author's words, a 'willingness to compromise...in the name of balance, tolerance, fairness and freedom', can be realized (p.150-151).

Sadly, Judt is no longer around to advocate his chosen mode of governance, and his disparaging chapter on the ineffectuality of the Left, historically traditional supporters of the values he espouses, does not incite much hope there (p.139-44). The fundamental problem, he proposes, in those societies where equality is lacking and wealth is the preserve of a privileged few, is a distinct unwillingness to even recognise that problems exist. There is no discourse, he complains, with which to address this disturbing social and economic malaise, and before we consider how to fix the problem, we must first discuss it. In this volume one feels that Judt is deliberately seeking to initiate this discourse, appealing to those who may never have considered the politics he espouses, or those like himself, who desire the Left to adopt a more confident and robust way of countering its critics. Moreover, this slim volume will appeal to a younger readership wishing to find a political language with which to discuss society's social and economic conundrums. *Ill Fares the Land*, then, has succeeded in addressing the discursive problem its author identifies, but is anyone listening?

Bibliography

Judt, Tony. 2005. *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*. London: William Heinemann.

The Kelvingrove Review

www.gla.ac.uk/tkr