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Thinking The Twentieth Century

THINKING
THE
TWENTIETH
CENTURY
TONY JUDT
with
Timothy Snyder



"A remarkable book... ideas crackle in the interplay between the authors... a wild ride through the ideological currents and shoals of 20th century thought." —*Los Angeles Times*



Synopsis

"Ideas crackle" in this triumphant final book of Tony Judt, taking readers on "a wild ride through the ideological currents and shoals of 20th century thought." • (Los Angeles Times) The final book of the brilliant historian and indomitable public critic Tony Judt, Thinking the Twentieth Century maps the issues and concerns of a turbulent age on to a life of intellectual conflict and engagement. The twentieth century comes to life as an age of ideas--a time when, for good and for ill, the thoughts of the few reigned over the lives of the many. Judt presents the triumphs and the failures of prominent intellectuals, adeptly explaining both their ideas and the risks of their political commitments. Spanning an era with unprecedented clarity and insight, Thinking the Twentieth Century is a tour-de-force, a classic engagement of modern thought by one of the century's most incisive thinkers. The exceptional nature of this work is evident in its very structure--a series of intimate conversations between Judt and his friend and fellow historian Timothy Snyder, grounded in the texts of the time and focused by the intensity of their vision. Judt's astounding eloquence and range are here on display as never before. Traversing the complexities of modern life with ease, he and Snyder revive both thoughts and thinkers, guiding us through the debates that made our world. As forgotten ideas are revisited and fashionable trends scrutinized, the shape of a century emerges. Judt and Snyder draw us deep into their analysis, making us feel that we too are part of the conversation. We become aware of the obligations of the present to the past, and the force of historical perspective and moral considerations in the critique and reform of society, then and now. In restoring and indeed exemplifying the best of intellectual life in the twentieth century, Thinking the Twentieth Century opens pathways to a moral life for the twenty-first. This is a book about the past, but it is also an argument for the kind of future we should strive for: Thinking the Twentieth Century is about the life of the mind--and the mindful life.

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Customer Reviews

An edited transcript by the second author of discussions with the first, a well-known public intellectual and historian of Eastern Europe, as he awaited death in 2009 from a neurological disorder that destroyed his ability to write but did not impair his mental faculties. Judt was the son of Jewish emigrants to England from Eastern Europe who grew up in 1950s mid-lower class London, went to Cambridge on scholarship and to the Ecole Normale Supérieure, became a Marxist, and spent his life teaching at Cambridge, Oxford, Berkeley and NYU and writing books on European history and essays for the New York Review of Books. This is the "Twentieth Century" to which the title refers. There is a lot of talk about what historians do (it is not so simple as just writing about what happened), about socialist policies that governments have or should have, about Nazism and Stalinism, about the Holocaust, about what other commentators on the left have said on these subjects, about how giving up on the Soviet Union was so hard for many leftists of an earlier generation because it meant giving up friendships, etc. By and large, interesting insights about the times and the lives of public intellectuals on the left, although the second author's obsession with the illegitimacy of the Bush presidency is tiresome at one point.

This book is a mix of memoirs and a critical introduction to 20th C. history. As a historian specializing in contemporary issues, he brings a unique perspective to the major political problems that we have faced in our lifetimes, reviewing them for the basics but also adding his unique interpretation. Indeed, as a "major" in international relations in France, I studied every single issue that he covers in this wonderfully interesting and challenging book. Starting off in a working class family, Judt outlines how he got into Cambridge, entering an intellectual elite that he never left. It was a combination of brains and extremely hard work, plus a bit of luck in the teachers who

encouraged him. He laments that the path that led him to Cambridge is rapidly vanishing as the power of money and privilege is renewing itself as he was writing. As I see it, there are 3 large issues that he attacked during his career. First, there was the French intellectual tradition, starting in about the 1930s and up to the 1980s. That was the era of Sartre, Camus, and Aron, men that I studied as a student in Paris. Though I have long since left them behind, it was an absolute delight to get his read on them, a journey that I made in a far less scholarly way than he. Second, starting as a young Zionist, he recapitulates his long journey from ardent Kibbutzim to the disillusioned critic, who saw Israel as a colonial power of questionable legitimacy. Agree with him or not, the case he makes - based on personal experience as a participant in the 1967 war that transformed Israel from a defensive power to an aggressively militaristic one - deserves consideration. Third, he covered the communist idea, from its origins in the 19C up to its end and the aftermath in Eastern Europe. This went beyond what had occurred during my studies and so was a great eye opener for me, truly new content that created an agenda of study that I will undertake over the next decade. Again, an intellectual delight. Throughout the book, Judt offers details from his personal life, which paralleled his intellectual undertakings. It is a candid and self-critical view, from his divorces to the environment at the New York Review of Books that opened new vistas for him as a writer. He even took up Czech in his mid-30s, to complete his study of the collapse of communism. He is wonderfully candid, to the point that I am not sure I would have liked to work with the man. For example, he cheerfully admits that New York University - his career home base - is mediocre. He also calls Thomas Friedman of the NYT "execrable" as a thinker, which I admit is exactly how I perceive him. Judt was a difficult guy, never wastes time on false modesty, and displays a refreshingly biting cynicism about the pretensions of his milieu. Now that is fun! The book was written as a kind of dialogue with another historian. I can't say that I particularly liked this style, but it offers a very fun overview of a life's work. The co-author is no sycophant, but he doesn't add much in my view and occasionally disrupts the unity of voice. While rigorous, it also lacks the tightness of a fully academic work, offering generalizations rather than a finely honed original thesis. Recommended as an introduction to a great thinker and a delightful summary of a life's work. Judt will be missed.

Tony Judt never ceases to amaze with his wealth of historical knowledge and balanced judgment. He holds out a model for us all of what scholarly erudition in a field - - whether this be history, literature, psychology, art - - should be. In this book and in his "Postwar," one profits immensely from his knowledge and perspective. Especially topical, I thought, are the pages at the end where he exposes the short-sightedness of present-day assumptions and thinking in American public

life. The co-author, Timothy Snyder, is a very worthy interlocutor, and we owe him a great deal for initiating and contributing to this end-of-life dialogue.

I think this is the best book I've read all year. It's one you'll want to read slowly, pausing frequently to absorb striking and deep historical and political observations. And unusually for a history book, there are some parts that are laugh out loud funny. It is possible that this book will appeal more to readers from a British background. It's a mixture of personal and historical observation, and the personal is heavily influenced by a lower middle class, London upbringing that was elevated through the educational opportunities offered by a now crumbling post-war social democratic contract.

The conversation between Judt and Snyder made me understand that I had no genuine knowledge of what went on in the 20th century, despite having lived through 2/3 of it. Not that I wasn't paying attention, but that I had obtained my information largely through the U.S.-lens that tends to tell us that everything the U.S. is doing is the most important thing that anyone is doing. Never felt so humbled by a book, I think. After I finished it, I read it again. And I've followed it up with others of Judt's works and continue to feel that his work is a great gift to anyone who makes the effort to read it. It is not easy because his frame of reference is so large. But you learn something very big.

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