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TONY JUDT

Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay.
Oliver Goldsmith, *The Deserted Village*, 1770

ILL FARES THE LAND

"A deeply learned, deeply humane heart's cry."
—LOS ANGELES TIMES

Ill Fares the Land

TONY JUDT

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ILL FARES THE LAND

Tony Judt was born in London in 1948. He was educated at King's College, Cambridge, and the École Normale Supérieure, Paris, and has taught at Cambridge, Oxford, Berkeley, and New York University, where he is currently University Professor and Director of the Remarque Institute, which is dedicated to the study of Europe and which he founded in 1995. Judt is the author or editor of thirteen books, including, most recently, *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century* and *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*, which was one of *The New York Times Book Review*'s Ten Best Books of 2005, winner of the Council on Foreign Relations Arthur Ross Book Award, and a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. He is a frequent contributor to *The New York Review of Books*, the *London Review of Books,* and *The New York Times*. In 2007 he was awarded the Hannah Arendt Prize; in 2009 he won the Orwell Prize for Lifetime Achievement.

For Daniel & Nicholas

Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay.

Oliver Goldsmith, *The Deserted Village (1770)*

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Owing to the unusual circumstances in which this book was written, I have incurred numerous debts which it is a pleasure to record. My former students Zara Burdett and Casey Selwyn served indefatigably as research assistants and transcribers, faithfully recording my thoughts, notes and readings over many months. Clémence Boulouque helped me find and incorporate recent material from the media, and responded untiringly to my inquiries and demands. She was also a superb editor.

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tion for many hours a day, sometimes working around the clock. He was responsible for locating many of the more arcane citations; but above all, he and I collaborated intimately on the editing of the text—for substance, style and coherence. It is the simple truth that I could not have written this book without him and it is all the better for his contribution.

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Not for the first time, I am beholden to Robert Silvers. It was at his suggestion that the lecture I gave on social democracy at NYU in the Fall of 2009 was first transcribed (thanks to the staff of the *New York Review*) and then published in their pages: giving rise to a wholly unanticipated chorus of demands for its expansion into a little book. Sarah Chalfant and Scott Moyers of The Wylie Agency vigorously encouraged this suggestion and The Penguin Press in New York and London was good

enough to welcome the project. I hope that they will all be pleased with the result.

In the writing of this book I have benefited hugely from the kindness of strangers, who have written to offer suggestions and criticisms of my writing on these subjects over the years. I could not possibly thank everyone in person, but I hope that for all its inevitable shortcomings the work itself will stand as a token of appreciation.

But my greatest debt is to my family. The burden that I have placed upon them over the past year appears to me quite intolerable, yet they have borne it so lightly that I was able to set aside my concerns and devote myself these past months almost entirely to the business of thinking and writing. Solipsism is the characteristic failing of the professional writer. But in my own case I am especially conscious of the self-indulgence: Jennifer Homans, my wife, has been completing her manuscript on the history of classical ballet while caring for me. My writing has benefited enormously from her love and generosity, now as in years past. That her own book will be published later this year is a tribute to her remarkable character.

My children—Daniel and Nicholas—lead busy adolescent lives. Nevertheless, they have found time to discuss with me the many themes interwoven into these pages. Indeed, it was thanks to our conversations across the dinner table that I first came

fully to appreciate just how much today's youth care about the world that we have bequeathed them—and how inadequately we have furnished them with the means to improve it. This book is dedicated to them.

New York,

February 2010

Contents

INTRODUCTION

A Guide for the Perplexed

"I cannot help fearing that men may reach a point where they look on every new theory as a danger, every innovation as a toilsome trouble, every social advance as a first step toward revolution, and that they may absolutely refuse to move at all."

—ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE

Something is profoundly wrong with the way we live today. For thirty years we have made a virtue out of the pursuit of material self-interest: indeed, this very pursuit now constitutes whatever remains of our sense of collective purpose. 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.

The materialistic and selfish quality of contemporary life is not inherent in the human condition. Much of what appears 'natural' today dates from the 1980s: the obsession with wealth creation, the cult of privatization and the private sector, the growing disparities of rich and poor. And above all, the rhetoric which accompanies these: uncritical admiration for unfettered markets, disdain for the public sector, the delusion of endless growth.

We cannot go on living like this. The little crash of 2008 was a reminder that unregulated capitalism is its own worst enemy: sooner or later it must fall prey to its own excesses and turn again to the state for rescue. But if we do no more than pick up the pieces and carry on as before, we can look forward to greater upheavals in years to come.

And yet we seem unable to conceive of alternatives. This too is something new. Until quite recently, public life in liberal societies was conducted in the shadow of a debate between defenders of 'capitalism' and its critics: usually identified with one or another form of 'socialism'. By the 1970s this debate had lost

much of its meaning for both sides; all the same, the 'Left-Right' distinction served a useful purpose. It provided a peg on which to hang critical commentary about contemporary affairs.

On the Left, Marxism was attractive to generations of young people if only because it offered a way to take one's distance from the status quo. Much the same was true of classical conservatism: a well-grounded distaste for over-hasty change gave a home to those reluctant to abandon long-established routines. Today, neither Left nor Right can find their footing.

For thirty years students have been complaining to me that 'it was easy for you': your generation had ideals and ideas, you believed in something, you were able to change things. 'We' (the children of the '80s, the '90s, the 'aughts') have nothing. In many respects my students are right. It *was* easy for us—just as it was easy, at least in this sense, for the generations who came before us. The last time a cohort of young people expressed comparable frustration at the emptiness of their lives and the dispiriting purposelessness of their world was in the 1920s: it is not by chance that historians speak of a 'lost generation'.

If young people today are at a loss, it is not for want of targets. Any conversation with students or schoolchildren will produce a startling checklist of anxieties. Indeed, the rising generation is acutely worried about the world it is to inherit. But accompanying these fears there is a general sentiment of

frustration: 'we' know something is wrong and there are many things we don't like. But what can we believe in? What should we do?

This is an ironic reversal of the attitudes of an earlier age. Back in the era of self-assured radical dogma, young people were far from uncertain. The characteristic tone of the '60s was that of overweening confidence: *we* knew just how to fix the world. It was this note of unmerited arrogance that partly accounts for the reactionary backlash that followed; if the Left is to recover its fortunes, some modesty will be in order. All the same, you must be able to name a problem if you wish to solve it.

This book was written for young people on both sides of the Atlantic. American readers may be struck by the frequent references to social democracy. Here in the United States, such references are uncommon. When journalists and commentators advocate public expenditure on social objectives, they are more likely to describe themselves—and be described by their critics—as 'liberals'. But this is confusing. Liberal is a venerable and respectable label and we should all be proud to wear it. But like a well-designed outer coat, it conceals more than it displays.

A liberal is someone who opposes interference in the affairs of others: who is tolerant of dissenting attitudes and unconventional behavior. Liberals have historically favored keeping other

people out of our lives, leaving individuals the maximum space in which to live and flourish as they choose. In their extreme form, such attitudes are associated today with self-styled 'libertarians', but the term is largely redundant. Most genuine liberals remain disposed to leave other people alone.

Social democrats, on the other hand, are something of a hybrid. They share with liberals a commitment to cultural and religious tolerance. But in public policy social democrats believe in the possibility and virtue of collective action for the collective good. Like most liberals, social democrats favor progressive taxation in order to pay for public services and other social goods that individuals cannot provide themselves; but whereas many liberals might see such taxation or public provision as a necessary evil, a social democratic vision of the good society entails from the outset a greater role for the state and the public sector.

Understandably, social democracy is a hard sell in the United States. One of my goals is to suggest that government can play an enhanced role in our lives without threatening our liberties—and to argue that, since the state is going to be with us for the foreseeable future, we would do well to think about what sort of a state we want. In any case, much that was best in American legislation and social policy over the course of the 20th century—and that we are now urged to dismantle in the name of efficiency