

## Progress in an Age of Fear?

**TONY JUDT:**

### **Ill Fares the Land: A Treatise on Our Present Discontents**

London 2010

Allen Lane, 237 pp.

**W**ith the publication of his last book, »Ill Fares the Land,« shortly before his death in August 2010, the great British historian Tony Judt made an invaluable contribution to the debate on the future of social democracy and progressive politics. The book is required reading for anyone interested in the past, present, and future of social democracy – as is Richard Wilkinson's and Kate Pickett's »The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better,« to which Tony Judt makes copious reference.

Naturally, one is not obliged to agree with every word even of required reading. But it does not matter whether one agrees with Judt's arguments or not: in any case, »Ill Fares the Land« compels social democrats to rethink their customary arguments. In the twenty-first century, can and should social democracy continue to conceive of itself as a party of progress? What direction should this progress now take? Or could it be that today »progress« represents rather the problem than the solution? These are the provocative questions that Judt poses.

It is clear that belief in the necessity of progress and its possibility in principle was always a constitutive factor in social democracy. In contrast, conservatives have tended to believe in the existence of a »natural order of things,« which could not be radically changed. Conservatism, properly speaking, was always a fundamentally pessimistic world view. That changed to some degree around 30 years ago with the emergence of the neoconservative and neoliberal hegemony. Judt rightly stresses the historical dimension of this turning of the tide: »It is the Right that has inherited the ambitious modernist urge to destroy and innovate in the name of a universal project.«

This observation is uncontroversial among social democrats. However, the conclusion Judt draws from it with regard to the task of social democracy is likely to give rise to some debate: »If social democracy has a future, it will be as a social democracy of fear. (...) The first task of radical dissenters today is to remind

their audience of the achievements of the twentieth century, along with the likely consequences of our heedless rush to dismantle them. The left, to be quite blunt about it, has something to conserve.«

Tony Judt's truly arresting point, therefore, is that in the twenty-first century it is social democracy which must become the party of a genuine or »conservative conservatism«: »We take for granted the institutions, legislation, services and rights that we have inherited from the great age of 20th century reform. It is time to remind ourselves that all of these were utterly inconceivable as recently as 1929. We are the fortunate beneficiaries of a transformation whose scale and impact was unprecedented. There is much to defend.« That is why »social democrats, characteristically modest in style and ambition, need to speak more assertively of past gains.«

They should indeed. Judt is quite right to emphasize that »[t]o abandon the labors of a century is to betray those who came before us as well as generations yet to come.« However, more questionable is the manner in which Judt seems to play off the task of defending »past gains« against the task of working towards the progressive goal of a better future for as many people as possible. In his New York lecture of October 19, 2009, on which the book is based Judt formulated the presumed alternative in particularly stark terms: »Rather than seeking to restore a language of optimistic progress, we should begin by reacquainting ourselves with the recent past.« But why should we have to choose between them?

This alleged contrast is inexplicable – and counterproductive for the social democratic cause in the twenty-first century. Of course, it is right to fight for a social democracy which defends the civil and social standards achieved in an earlier era: equality, justice, integrity, belief in the possibility and worth of common efforts for the common good. In this specific sense, social democrats must really be »conservative.« But as every footballer knows, teams which, after scoring an early goal, timidly try to defend their one-nil lead for the remainder of the match are likely to be punished. In politics, no less than in football, it pays to take the game to the opposition, dictating the play and believing in one's own ability to score more goals.

In other words, if the goals social democrats represent are important and they have a cause worth fighting for – which is indeed the case – they must take their ideas to the people, instead of merely taking cover and hoping for the best, while secretly expecting the worst. It is true that in the era of radical free-market hegemony, which has now passed, the idea of social democracy went onto the defensive. Even social democrats themselves no longer believed in their cause, because they had lost their specifically social democratic »language of optimistic progress.« And this language continued to ebb away from them, because they no longer believed in their cause. One led to the other – and vice versa.

This vicious circle has to be broken. As things stand, there is indeed every reason to fear. Free-market radicalism may be a thing of the past – at least as

a hegemonic narrative – but the destruction of everything achieved under the aegis of social democracy in the post-war years still threatens. As a result of climate change; endemic financial, economic, debt, and currency crises; population growth; energy scarcity; demographic imbalances; mass migration; scarcity of food; terrorism; weapons of mass destruction; nuclear proliferation; and a public which is either distracted or panic-stricken; the world has indeed become a very dangerous place. During such times, backward-looking »parties of fear,« held together by little more than a yearning somehow to halt the erosion of their earlier achievements will never be able to mobilize anything more than ultimately help-less blocking minorities.

Fear paralyzes people and stifles creativity. Instead of giving in to it, however, we should revive the conviction that the idea of a progressive, future-oriented social democracy, which also includes green and liberal goals, has every hope of winning electoral majorities in the twenty-first century. If social democrats themselves do not believe that they have something valuable to offer, why should anyone put their faith in them? Martin Luther King did not say: »I have a nightmare.« And Barack Obama did not become president of the United States and introduce health insurance for millions of previously uninsured Americans by wringing his hands about neoliberal hegemony. Instead, he prevailed by persuading enough people that positive change, progress, and a better future are still possible.

Perhaps – even probably – there will not be a better future for all. The dilemma of progress in the twenty-first century is evident. In his latest book, »The Politics of Climate Change,« Anthony Giddens puts his finger on the problem: »Our civilization could self-destruct – no doubt about it – and with awesome consequences. Doomsday is no longer a religious concept, a day of spiritual reckoning, but a possibility imminent in our society and economy. (...) No wonder many take fright. Let's go back! Let's return to a simpler world! They are entirely understandable sentiments and have practical application in some contexts. Yet there can be no overall ›going back‹ – the very expansion of human power that has created such deep problems is the only means of resolving them, with science and technology at the forefront. There will probably be nine billion people in the world by 2050 – after which the world population hopefully will stabilize, especially if the least developed countries make significant economic and social progress. Ways will have to be found of providing those nine billion people with a decent way of life.«

The world of the twenty-first century therefore is in urgent need of progress and of alert social democracies so that at least some of the problems can be solved for which, it must be said, past progress is also responsible. To be sure, we cannot be certain that we will succeed in this. What we can be certain of, however, is that conservatism, whether social democratic or otherwise, will not save us. It may be that we are doomed to failure even if we opt for more and – hopefully – better progress. In any case, we are definitely doomed to failure if we reject the guiding

notion of progress out of hand. As even Tony Judt admits: »The past really is another country: we cannot go back.«

Not that social democrats and other progressives have nothing more to learn from history. Far from it. Our success in coping with this century will depend not least on whether enough people in western countries come to acknowledge how precious, improbable, and fragile the social and liberal-democratic post-war settlement is. Judt is right to warn us not to take anything for granted: »If we are going to build a better future, we must begin with a deeper appreciation of the ease with which even solidly-grounded liberal democracies can founder.«

The fact that Tony Judt relentlessly and assiduously promulgated this message right up until his death merits the highest praise. »Social democracy does not represent an ideal future,« he writes, »it does not even represent the ideal past. But among the options available to us today, it is better than anything else to hand.« Social democracy will therefore remain indispensable in the twenty-first century – not as the defensive ersatz-conservatism which Tony Judt had in mind, however, but as the optimistic, progressive, but also sober political belief that our dangerous times so urgently need.

But will social democracy take on this task and is it even capable of doing so? These are the questions which, inspired by Tony Judt's book, are now being debated all over Europe – for example, in »Berliner Republik,« in »Die Neue Gesellschaft,« and on the website of the Dutch Wiardi Beckman Stichting. In the Netherlands, Judt's book was available in every bookstore – in Dutch translation – not long after the appearance of the original. The fact that Judt's complacent German publisher – of many years' standing – did not find itself able even to announce a German-language edition of »Ill Fares the Land« in the months before his death is as incomprehensible as it is unforgivable.

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