



Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956

Tony Judt

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The uniquely prominent role of French intellectuals in European cultural and political life following World War II is the focus of Tony Judt's newest book. He analyzes this intellectual community's most divisive conflicts: how to respond to the promise and the betrayal of Communism and how to sustain a commitment to radical ideals when confronting the hypocrisy in Stalin's Soviet Union, in the new Eastern European Communist states, and in France itself. Judt shows why this was an all-consuming moral dilemma to a generation of French men and women, how their responses were conditioned by war and occupation, and how post-war political choices have come to sit uneasily on the conscience of later generations of French intellectuals.

Judt's analysis extends beyond the writings of fashionable "Existentialist" personalities such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir to include a wide intellectual community of Catholic philosophers, non-aligned journalists, literary critics and poets, Communist and non-Communist alike.

Judt treats the intellectual dilemmas of the postwar years as an unfinished history. French intellectuals have not fully come to terms with the gnawing sense of what Judt calls the "moral irresponsibility" of those years. The result, he suggests, is a legacy of bad faith and confusion that has damaged France's cultural standing, notably in newly liberated Eastern Europe, and which reflects the nation's larger difficulty in confronting its own ambivalent past.

Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956 Details

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Bernardo Kaiser says

A collection of what Nicholas Taleb calls "Intellectuals but idiots".

David says

Judt's "Postwar" is magisterial, his brilliance unquestioned, but this is him at his worst. Moralistic, prosecutorial, and aggressively uninterested in understanding why people might have thought what they did. There are great takedowns out there so I won't write another; this one is freely accessible:
<http://www.h-france.net/Salon/Salonvo...>

Buck says

The late Tony Judt was still an obscure academic when he published *Past Imperfect*, which may explain the almost aggressive geekiness of the subtitle: *French Intellectuals, 1944-1956*. Unless they mistook it for an epitaph, no one but a total poindexter would find that subtitle remotely appealing.

I am, as it happens, a total poindexter. This particular period of intellectual history has always held a perverse fascination for me. I think it's just the spectacle of so many brilliant people being so colossally stupid. Whenever I want to console myself for not being a genius, I just close my eyes and think of Sartre. What a mind! And what a disgrace!

Past Imperfect is a very angry book. It's a cool, controlled, lavishly footnoted anger, but it's all the more devastating for that. Judt, who calls his book "an essay on intellectual irresponsibility" (why couldn't *that* have been the subtitle?) paints Sartre and his cohort as a generation of vipers. With a few honourable exceptions, the big brains of postwar France were horny for totalitarianism. Not only Sartre and de Beauvoir, but Picasso, Aragon, Merleau-Ponty, and a host of lesser lights of the French Left – all became groupies and fartcatchers for Stalin, using their artistic and philosophical flair to explain away the Gulag.

This is old news – in uptown circles, anyway. What makes *Past Imperfect* so eye-opening is the very geekiness I mentioned at the outset. Judt, a true scholar, is staggeringly well-informed, and every bit as theoretically sophisticated as his subjects. He's read all the dingy little periodicals of the day and knows where the bodies are buried. He can range at will over the intellectual terrain, backtracking to the French Revolution, or detouring into Kojève's Hegel lectures. Without ever trying to excuse, he renders the monstrous folly of these people a little more comprehensible. He points out, for instance, that there was a void at the centre of French politics where liberalism ought to have been, forcing otherwise moderate thinkers to take up extreme positions on the Left or Right. That, to me, is just a really smart observation, and the book is full of insights like that.

I suppose, if there's one comforting thought to take away from all this, it's that it doesn't seem to matter very much what intellectuals think. In mature democracies, they're condemned to political marginality, and I'd

say that's a very good thing. For decades, France's chattering classes were hopelessly compromised, and yet the nation went about its business, building democratic institutions, getting rich...opening Euro Disney. It ain't sexy (or Sartrean) but it's progress.

Lysergius says

This is a slightly esoteric subject but absolutely fascinating. The author explores not only the pronouncements of the leading French intellectuals of the time but also the cultural, political and social context against which the pronouncements were made.

It is difficult today to understand how a thinker of Sartre's reputation could engage in defence of the Communist show trials, of the invasion of Hungary and later Czechoslovakia and retain that reputation, nay even enhance it. No one it seems is exempt from talking rubbish. The misfortune lies in the way it is said, said Montaigne and one has to agree that in the case of Sartre this was so.

Tony Judt's review does not stop at Sartre, the left wing or even the right wing of French thought of this period, but attempts to examine in detail all expression of thought from the whole political and intellectual spectrum of France at this time. He also endeavours to set this in a wider European context, but of course the French intellectual community carried most weight, so the contemporary writing from Hungary, Poland, or Czechoslovakia was not so important.

Judt's conclusions are for me the most significant part of the book. He looks at the role of modern intellectual practice, largely the purview of the universities these days, and highlights the idea that liberalism contains the seeds of totalitarianism within its core, especially when the state plays a major role in running our lives. What is to be done?

Ed says

It is a pleasure to read someone who has such a clear eyed analysis of "my half-century." In Past Imperfect Judt asks why so many French intellectuals [Sartre, de Beauvoir etc.:] after World War II were blind to Stalin's atrocities. I especially liked the chapter "Liberalism, There is the Enemy," which gives a lucid description of how the French idea of rights differs from the American idea. I'll put this book on my shelf with those about how people in the South rationalized slavery.

Manuel Barrios says

Excelente. Y muy recomendable

Nick Handler says

I love Tony Judt, and this book is a pretty unflinching takedown of some major twentieth century intellectuals (he basically uses Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir as verbal punching bags). The thesis is that French writers and philosophers abdicated their moral responsibilities as public intellectuals in the years after World War II by openly endorsing violent Communist regimes in Europe and elsewhere. Judt seems to argue that this impulse was the product of both guilt (very few of the Communist bloc's most vocal defenders did anything to actually resist fascism when it came to their doorstep during the War) and a lingering preference for authoritarianism in French intellectual culture. He has a pretty interesting discussion of the common intellectual roots of French Communists and Fascists in the pre-War years.

I wasn't familiar with many of the writers he mentions--he talks about a lot of people who have since slipped into obscurity--but that didn't detract from the book for me. Judt's main point is that intellectuals should serve a real public purpose in our society--to hold political leaders morally accountable--and that when they fail in that purpose, the result can be disaster. The obscurity of some of his references doesn't really detract from the force of the argument. And he is a good enough writer that he keeps otherwise esoteric discussions pretty engaging.

Sauli says

The quote by Montaigne that ends this book ('nobody is exempt from talking rubbish. The misfortune lies in the way it is said' or as the better-sounding original goes 'Personne n'est exempt de dire des fadaises. Le malheur est de les dire curieusement') illustrates the point of this book rather well. The best minds go easily wrong with their zeal to abstract everything. As much as I'm sympathetic (though decidedly ambivalent) towards continental philosophy, this book shows just how dangerous deifying concepts is. Also the chapter on Anti-Americanism is rather poignant even today, as related to those leftists trying to justify Castro's crimes.
