



2011

Ill Fares the Land. Tony Judt. Reviewed by Marguerite G.
Rosenthal.

Marguerite G. Rosenthal
Salem State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Rosenthal, Marguerite G. (2011) "*Ill Fares the Land.* Tony Judt. Reviewed by Marguerite G. Rosenthal.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 38 : Iss. 4 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol38/iss4/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



how those systems reflect a society's history and cultural thinking, and how systems address the world-wide problem of child abuse and neglect.

*Dorinda N. Noble, School of Social Work
Texas State University-San Marco*

Tony Judt (2010). *Ill Fares the Land*. New York: The Penguin Press, \$25.95 (hardcover), \$15 (paperback).

Written as a critique of contemporary Western politics and economies as well as a call to revisit the social welfare commitments of the post World War II period in Europe and the United States, Tony Judt wrote the essays in this book as he was paralyzed and dying of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS); he died in August, 2010 at the age of 61. Widely acknowledged as the leading historian of 20th century European history, Judt was also a social and political critic whose essays were frequently published in *The New York Review of Books* and other journals both in the U.S. and Britain, where he was born, studied and taught before assuming an endowed position at NYU.

The title of the book is taken from a 1770 poem by Oliver Goldsmith: "Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,/Where wealth accumulates, and men decay." Judt details the several ways in which contemporary Western societies have experienced a decline in economic and social well-being as a consequence of having abandoned the vigorous economic and political commitments to the welfare state at mid-20th century. The erosion of good jobs, beginning in the 1970s, combined with changes in tax policies that favor the wealthy, has had dire consequences for sustaining welfare state programs that, among other things, reduced inequality and strengthened the social contract among the citizenry. Growing inequality is singled out as the most serious contemporary problem (p. 184). These developments are most acute in the U.S. and Britain and escalated under and following the Reagan and Thatcher regimes, but the populace in continental Europe, he suggested (clairvoyantly, considering the current economic difficulties there), was not well served by the advent of the European Union.

Judt begins each essay with a quote, many taken from

economists, principally Keynes, who supported a capitalist economy with a strong public sector and public spending when the private market faltered. Indeed, the book is a strong endorsement for social democracy, European-style. Judt acknowledges that socialism, too often conflated with the failed communist regimes of the last century, has acquired a bad name, especially in the U.S. And in a fascinating bit of intellectual history in a section entitled "The Revenge of the Austrians," Judt traces the influence on American laissez-faire economists, principally those at the University of Chicago, by émigrés who conflated any governmental interference with the economy as a precursor to authoritarianism, whether fascist or communist. At the same time, he offers a pungent criticism of the new left of the 1960s that, he states, was too concerned with individualism (a distortion of "liberty") and identity politics, resulting in a consequent denigration of the state and its capacity to represent society as a whole and improve the lot of most.

In one of the longer chapters, "The Unbearable Lightness of Politics," Judt harshly criticizes the trend toward privatization and the erosion of taxes sufficient to support welfare programs, public goods such as the railroads, healthcare and so forth. In fact, he states that we are returning to the pre-democratic state with privilege dominant and the expense of the taxpayer who, lacking the benefits of the welfare state, becomes politically disengaged and mistrustful of government (see the Tea Party). And he has this to say about political leadership: "During the long century of constitutional liberalism, from Gladstone to LBJ, Western democracies were led by a distinctly superior class of statesmen. ...Politically speaking, ours is an age of the pygmies" (pp. 164-165) [n.b., a friend comments that the statement insults Pygmies].

Inspired by a question addressed to him by a twelve-year-old, Judt wrote these essays for "young people" as a history of where we've come from and a guide for what is possible. *Ill Fares the Land*, however, would make an excellent resource for both undergraduate and graduate students. Brief, free of jargon but passionate about all the important questions of our time, this is an important book.

*Marguerite G. Rosenthal, Professor Emerita
Salem State University*