A few months after he was diagnosed with ALS, Tony Judt, a professor at New York University and the author of "Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945," agreed to record for publication a series of conversations with his friend and fellow historian Timothy Snyder. Able to use only his head, eyes and vocal cords, Judt "talked" the 20th century, reflecting on his life as a British Jew, scholarship student at Cambridge University, former Zionist, professor and public intellectual; on influential liberal, socialist, communist and fascist thinkers; and on contemporary politics in Europe and the United States. Snyder edited the transcripts and Judt revised them before his death in 2010.

The final product, "Thinking the Twentieth Century," is an intellectual feast, learned, lucid, challenging and accessible. Judt dissects the economic theories of Friedrich Hayek and John Maynard Keynes. He compares the constitutionalism of Jürgen Habermas with the republican ethics analyzed by Hannah Arendt. He declares that Jerzy Giedroyc, who designed the strategy that guided Poland through the 1990s, was the Cold War's most important liberal.

The conversations between Judt and Snyder crackle. Snyder wonders why fascists encouraged singing in public. Judt explains how the defense of free markets in the 20th century originated in Central Europe, migrated to the United States, and then returned home, so to speak, "in exaggerated and distilled form," via Washington and Chicago. And the two men propose, provocatively, that the more democratic a society becomes, the more limited will be the influence of its genuine intellectuals.

Judt maintains that in a time of self-censorship and conformity, intellectuals have a special obligation to inject "unpleasant truths" into the public square. In "Thinking the Twentieth Century," he practices what he preaches. In distinguished universities, including his own, he writes, history has slipped into a "cesspit" of postmodernist cultural studies, with its "absurd trajectory of political correctness," its conviction that the past is "a set of lies and prejudices in need of correction," its preoccupation with "social marginalia" of interest only to other scholars, and a deconstructive methodology that loses touch with reality.

For two generations, he insists, citizens have been educated without common references - or a knowledge of what happened in the past, "in what order and with what outcome." No wonder they contribute so little
to the governance of their society.

Judt wears his terrible honesty as a badge of honor. He dismisses New York Times columnist David Brooks as a smooth talker who knows nothing - and Brooks' colleague, Thomas Friedman, as a name-dropping, self-proclaimed expert on the Middle East, whose support for the Iraq war was "contemptible." Judt claims that the demagoguery of Newt Gingrich, Dick Cheney and Glenn Beck does "just enough harm to threaten the quality of the republic but not quite enough damage to be seen for what it really is. Which is native American fascism."

Judt's reprise of his criticisms of Israel, and his recommendation of a single state for Palestinians and Jews, which appeared in the New York Review of Books in 2003, is searching, searing and, at times, shrill. Insisting, somewhat disingenuously, that he is "not a natural polemicist," he condemns Zionists, and especially "American cheerleaders for Israel," for their "fanaticism, and myopic, exclusivist tunnel vision."

Judt claims that Israelis have raised the prospect of imminent extermination for more than a half century to exploit the fears, memories and responsibilities of people around the world. In the process, they have devalued the true meaning of the Holocaust, reducing it to "Israel's excuse for bad behavior."

Since truly democratic societies must be aware of stability and change, Judt emphasizes, those who study contemporary history should enter public policy debates. We need them to take "tidy nonsense" (via assertions, for example, that Saddam Hussein is Hitler reincarnate), "make a mess of it," and put in its place "a narrative line, a coherent explanation, a comprehensible story." Because if all that is left are messes - and blurred lines - then history and historians "lose any claim on the civic conversation."

Even if Judt was "a trifle solipsistic," and in part because he made no pretense to objectivity, his extraordinarily informative work (and the stimulating conversations that comprise "Thinking the Twentieth Century") help us contextualize, comprehend and critique the complex world in which we live.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. books@sfchronicle.com

http://sfchronicle.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2012/02/19/RV621N6TBJ.DTL

This article appeared on page GF - 5 of the San Francisco Chronicle

© 2012 Hearst Communications Inc. | Privacy Policy | Feedback | RSS Feeds | FAQ | Site Index | Contact