

## **Book Review: Age of Anger – Pankaj Mishra**

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The current global turbulence – the recoil from globalization, political and economic shocks, Brexit, terrorism, ISIS, rise of leaders like Donald Trump and Recep Erdogan and so on – is the subject of this book. In dwelling on it, Pankaj Mishra looks beyond the proximate causes to where its complex roots lie in the historical landscape and the mind of man: - advent of a commercial-industrial civilization in the west leading to its subsequent replication elsewhere and the vastly disruptive impact on societies and human condition of that transformation. Lest it might be perceived as too audacious a claim for a book of such modest length, he explains that it rather seeks to explore “a particular climate of ideas, a structure of feeling and cognitive disposition from the age of Rousseau to our own age of anger”. The tenor of the book then is somewhat comparable in parts to Francis Fukuyama’s “End of History” – whose thesis it summarily dismisses – which has thymos (the desire for recognition) as a refrain. Here in this book it is resentment, that expressive French word for existential resentment of other people’s being, caused by an intense mix of envy and sense of humiliation and purposelessness. It is inherent in the structure of societies where formal equality between individuals co-exists with massive differences in power, education, status and property ownership. It is also the key, according to Mishra, to the psyche of malcontents across the world today. A burgeoning and deepening resentment poisons civil society and undermines political liberty, says Mishra.

On the prognosis of the present global malaise, Mishra holds out little optimism. A global civil war may well be commencing already. For another, the two ways humankind can self-destruct, a civil war on a global scale or destruction of the natural environment, are rapidly converging. We are at any rate up against a state of permanent and uncontrolled crisis reflecting the global faultlines – the growing animus against economic or power elites created by neo-liberalism or post-communist economic reforms,

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the resurgence of alienated radicals, the rise of demagogues, the cult of redemptive violence and insurgencies and counter-insurgencies.

These fault lines, according to Mishra, arise from the failure of the historic modernization project which had been initiated and pursued across the world by the Atlantic West. We do not, however, seem to realize it. For we have been treated to a sanitized history of that modernization. Not only have centuries of civil war, imperial conquest, genocide and slavery in Europe and America in the course of modernization been downplayed, but its connections with the present travails both of the west and of the rest of the world, whether in nation building efforts or socio-economic arrangements, have been all but ignored. The “facile self-satisfied narratives” of western thinkers like Francis Fukuyama and Niall Ferguson bear out this fact.

Mishra’s own narrative of modernization under western auspices traces it to the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It predictably follows its course through the democratic revolutions in Britain in the seventeenth and America in the eighteenth century, the French Revolution thereafter and the colonial ventures of the European man who was animated by the new materialist and self-expansionist urge, changing not only the socio-economic and political scheme of things in Europe but also the very fibre of non-western societies and infecting them with the idea of materialist advance and progress. Now after the two world wars, the end of the cold war, strides in nation building in the post-colonial phase and successes of neo-liberalism in the developed countries of the west, cosmopolitan liberalism has in our time created an interdependent community of nations as well as a homogeneous world market with so much to show in terms of prosperity, education, scientific advance and national development. But the original promise of Enlightenment liberalism of a universal civilization harmoniously combining economic and social well-being with personal self-realization is far from materialization.

In setting out his narrative, Mishra calls for a different look at history of the last three centuries, eschewing the western, particularly Anglo-American, assumptions of that history such as the historical inevitability of democracy and free markets. To those who believe that the universalization of the liberal-democratic order is part of the unfolding of history, Mishra issues a sober reminder that vary little in Europe’s own intellectual and political

history supported the assumption that the Atlantic West's liberal institutions would spread eastwards. Within Europe, the first six decades after the Declaration of the Rights of Man during the French Revolution were replete with war, conspiracy, mob violence and authoritarian rule. Subsequently, the claims of western universalism to create a life of universal validity were gravely undermined by historic calamities like World War I, the Great Depression and World War II (including the holocaust). There was, besides, the alternative western hypothesis – the illegitimate child of enlightenment – of the communist era from 1917 to the early 1990s. The post-cold war period of triumphalism was accompanied by wars in Chechnya, Afghanistan, Africa and South America spawning precursors to the twenty first century's terrorists. On the economic side, the non-west's adoption of the western economic model has already led to the disillusioning knowledge in that vast segment of the world that it has no real prospect of catching up with the west even as the process of imitative development is only bound to cause horrendous environmental damage to itself and to the world.

What marks off Mishra's work is the dexterous way he weaves together an ensemble of themes round the subject drawing on the extensive material in the bibliography. Being a writer with a keen sensibility, he has a partiality for the writings and perceptions of novelists and poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in seeking to apprehend the connections of our own age of anger – the thrust of the book – with the past, and in particular, the deep intellectual and psychological affinities of movements like the ISIS not only with groups of the past but with the impulses and inspirations behind them. Such privileging of literary sensibility over scholarly analysis is at once the strength and weakness of this book. It provides splendid insights, but can also deflect.

Taking the cue from the shift of European culture from the religious to the secular as a result of the Enlightenment, Mishra recounts the history of that transition in terms of loss of religious faith, its return in new forms centred on the mostly liberal idea of progress and the drive to find true freedom and equality in ways as yet unavailing – romanticism, nationalism, socialism and anarchist nihilism. In doing so, he goes back and forth between the present and the times past to reveal historically recurring phenomena and to show

how so much in our experience resonates with that of the people in the nineteenth century.

Mishra explains how modernity inaugurated by the French and the Industrial revolutions represented a whole universe of possibilities about how human beings could act and shape history collectively and individually. The quest for equality, embourgeoisement and class war, deculturalization in large parts of the world, mimetic rivalry as a force of disruption in a materialist society both at the levels of individuals and nations, radical Islam – all those figure in his schematic review of the course traversed by modernity. Indeed one can get a little lost in the thicket of concepts and theories that he employs to interpret the history, much as Mishra makes the trenchant point that the sources of resentment have been, and are, embedded in a fundamentally unstable social and political order characterized by atomizing societies and threatened old values in which old concepts and categories no longer hold firm. "Simply defined", says Mishra, "the energy and ambition released by the individual will to power far exceed the capacity of existing political, social and economic institutions". As to the individual freedom supposedly offered by digital empowerment, it is a false allure because the confining fun-house mirrors of Facebook and Twitter only disguise the competitiveness and envy provoked by the constant exposure to other people's success and well-being.

Mishra thus presents a many-stranded account of humankind's present discontents, both obvious and underlying, but errs in not giving enough credit to human ingenuity and imagination to find remedies. Even liberalism with all the faults that he justifiably sees in it has shown a capacity in the past to adapt and evolve and could arguably do so again, all the more since we live in a knowledge society. On the other hand, Mishra exercises a perceptive sensibility across a wide range of the ills of our world in a way that has shades of both Rousseau and Edward Zaid.

And speaking of Rousseau, a notable theme of the book is the binary opposition of Voltaire and Rousseau in their conceptions of modernization and in the manner they respectively embodied the thesis and antithesis of liberalism. If Voltaire the rationalist, the castigator of ecclesiasticism, the votary of progress and the proponent of the benefits of trade, spirit of property, material prosperity and consumerism was an advocate of

peaceful change and the progenitor of the liberal political and economic order, Rousseau through his call for equality, attacks on the existing social order, role as an outsider spiritually alienated from society but with a vision of a community where man is enabled to take a full and equal part in government, represented variously instinct, revolution and anarchy. Mishra argues that Rousseau's meditations on self-knowledge and self-mastery moved him from victimhood to moral supremacy, thereby enacting "the dialectic of resentment that has become commonplace in our time."

Anyone interested in the history of ideas will read this book with much enjoyment.