



Age of Anger: A History of the Present

Pankaj Mishra

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One of our most important public intellectuals reveals the hidden history of our current global crisis

How can we explain the origins of the great wave of paranoid hatreds that seem inescapable in our close-knit world—from American shooters and ISIS to Donald Trump, from a rise in vengeful nationalism across the world to racism and misogyny on social media? In *Age of Anger*, Pankaj Mishra answers our bewilderment by casting his gaze back to the eighteenth century before leading us to the present.

He shows that as the world became modern, those who were unable to enjoy its promises—of freedom, stability, and prosperity—were increasingly susceptible to demagogues. The many who came late to this new world—or were left, or pushed, behind—reacted in horrifyingly similar ways: with intense hatred of invented enemies, attempts to re-create an imaginary golden age, and self-empowerment through spectacular violence. It was from among the ranks of the disaffected that the militants of the nineteenth century arose—angry young men who became cultural nationalists in Germany, messianic revolutionaries in Russia, bellicose chauvinists in Italy, and anarchist terrorists internationally.

Today, just as then, the wide embrace of mass politics and technology and the pursuit of wealth and individualism have cast many more billions adrift in a demoralized world, uprooted from tradition but still far from modernity—with the same terrible results.

Making startling connections and comparisons, *Age of Anger* is a book of immense urgency and profound argument. It is a history of our present predicament unlike any other.

Age of Anger: A History of the Present Details

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From Reader Review Age of Anger: A History of the Present for online ebook

Sebastien says

This was a fascinating discussion. Very meandering, maybe organization and presentation could've been streamlined so that knocks it down a bit for me. To be fair, given the breadth of the material and ambitious nature of this book it is probably an impossible task. But overall I enjoyed the author's exploration of the intellectual history of "ressentiment" (anger, resentment). His exploration stretches as far back as the French Revolution.

I guess if I had to distill things the main focus here is about anti-systems intellectuals; intellectuals who rebel against the power of the state/power elite, the insipid and empty nature of bourgeois life (as some see it!), the hollowing out of spirit and agency due to the cult of modern materialism/consumerism, inequality and asymmetry of power in society, the sterilized secularized nature of the liberal Enlightenment era. What is the fall-out from these ideas? this kind of thinking can be warped into burn the system down philosophy with a focus on extreme nationalism and xenophobia, a mode of thought that is willing to destroy any and everything (with everything permitted, all crimes permitted so long as ends justify means). Of course for such ideas to take hold the ground amongst the public must be fertile, there must already be wide discontent, anger, economic pain/inequality, cultural revanchist sentiment, the view that society is spiritually dead, anger against entrenched elites who seem to monopolize power (politically, culturally, economically)...

The book goes beyond the intellectual realm and explores individuals and groups who acted on some of these ideas (including terrorists like Timothy McVeigh, elements of Al Qaeda. Symmetry between some of their thinking was surprising to me but in a way makes sense).

I really enjoyed his examination of Rousseau and Voltaire, along with various other contemporaries like de Maistre (I know very little about him, but de Maistre critiqued them both, I've made a note to read more on him). As I understand it, and forgive the flattening of nuance into simple caricatures, but Rousseau struck me as a pretty harsh anti-system, anti-elitist, anti-bourgeois, anti-materialist guy (most of which wasn't really new to me, but my depth of understanding his philosophy is low). What was new to me was Voltaire, I had no idea he was so wealthy and entrepreneurial. So while he was a rationalist, skeptic, etc, based on Mishra's presentation he comes across as an old school neoliberal elitist who looked down upon the masses in his own ways (even though he was locked out from the power elite that had political power, he made up for it with financial and cultural/intellectual power). That was fascinating, given those facts it makes sense why he and Rousseau absolutely hated each other.

I guess when it comes down to it I think both figures are interesting, would love to read more about them and their relationship as well. But to me a guy like Rousseau is more dangerous than a guy like Voltaire, even though both have flaws. And yet I'm firmly of the belief that thinkers like Rousseau are important, guys like him shake things up, inject a bit of passion and excitement back into the intellectual and public realms, challenge the holders of power... but excesses from this kind of character can be incredibly dangerous, can unleash an uncontrollable monster within the public realm. Then again, such ideas only get hold of the public imagination when the public is ripe and angry enough to embrace them, and some of these guys like Rousseau have a real bloodlust that is frightening and can help give frameworks for people to execute campaigns of violence. Although I'm sure when people are motivated/angry enough they can find a reason to destroy regardless of if a guy like Rousseau exists or not. (these are merely my impressions)

There were also major explorations of Russian intellectual thought, especially mid-19th to early 20th century, certainly not a lack of bomb-throwing burn the system type guys in that era! But given that the vast majority were locked out and completely disenfranchised from any shred of power it makes sense that this would be the perfect grounds for such anger. Dostoevsky is endlessly fascinating (read a lot of him when I was younger, want to get back to reading his work, more familiar with his explorations on suffering than his political philosophy). Also exploration of quite a few German thinkers like Nietzsche. Nice analysis of the dynamic between France and Germany, both intellectually, politically and the interplay between those who adopted certain French cultural intellectual ideas and those who rebelled against it. And the tension that occurs when there is a dominant hegemonic foreign culture/ideology and the need to define oneself against it and form a counter/counter-vision. Mishra also points out this interesting dynamic in India.

There was a section on Hindu nationalism and the development of modern ressentiment in India. The book gets into some pretty nuanced psychological analysis with both Germany and India, how the dynamics worked between those who adopted certain intellectual ideas from abroad and how it warped them in different ways (not really in ways you'd necessarily expect). Learned quite a bit in this section, that history is somewhat non-linear and multi-factional which was interesting, some of it is somewhat speculative but makes you think.

Basically lots of good stuff. This is a very ambitious book and sure it falls short in a few sections, it is hard to tie everything together. The author has a lot of knowledge, has read a lot, has some very interesting insights. I imagine some people might take issue with some of his analysis, for me it works quite well overall, but even if you don't agree with his analysis the discussion and explorations are fabulous and make it well worth the read.

PS. I thought this was a solid op-ed recently written by Mishra on US situation:
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/28/opinion/pankaj-mishra-nationalism-is-a-global-civil-war.html>

Paul says

If it feels like the world recently has been splitting in two, along comes Pankaj Mishra to let you know: You're not wrong! Describing what he calls a "global civil war," Mishra in *Age of Anger* describes more than 200 years of rhetorical, even bloody conflict between two conflicting worldviews: The Enlightenment modernism of Voltaire and his ideological descendants, and the reactionary nationalism of Rousseau and his.

Mishra's book is incredibly well researched, stretching as it does from 18th-century France to 21st-century China, with stops to sketch ideological histories of Italy, Iran, Germany, India and Russia, among others. I am frankly dazzled by how he manages to condense so much information into such a relatively short book; no matter how well read you are, you almost certainly will learn new things and likely be introduced to new people.

Of course, it's that very trick – packing so much into just 300 or so pages – that left me struggling to keep up. At times, concepts and characters flow into each other. I often found myself re-reading paragraphs and flipping back to make sure I could understand the flow of Mishra's thoughts. The book was worth the struggle, but I felt a longer book with more room to structure the concepts in a more traditional way would actually have made this a more enjoyable read.

In the end, Mishra's thesis is compelling. By tracing the history of nationalism through the way stations of

anarchism, nihilism and terrorism, he places in the same ideological bed both Islamism and Trumpism – both of them rising from disaffection with the failed promises of gilded modernity, just as terrorism and nationalism rose together for the same reasons in the late 19th century.

It's this hard work of making connections, both within our time and across centuries and continents, that makes Mishra's work so powerful. We are all connected, to each other and to our past, and although many pundits and politicians portray a clash of civilizations between the modern West and the anarchic Middle East, Mishra shows that in fact the clash is within and between us all, for we are all children of both the Enlightenment and its dissenters.

Jared says

Disclaimer: I did not enjoy this book and I apologize for the lengthy critique, but I had experienced my own 'age of anger' while reading this book.

I gave the book due diligence and decided to quit reading after 144 pages - something I typically avoid doing. I decided to put the book down because I could not quite get over the structural and style flaws with the work. The following review is of the first 1/3 of the book, but it appeared as though the book wasn't going to get any better.

The tragic part is that I looked forward to reading this book because the concept seems quite interesting and very timely. The world appears to be full of angry individuals and societies. This book's objective - I think - was to explain the sources of this rage and the implications for our modern world.

First of all, I want to say that I believe that the editor of this book failed the author entirely. This, in my opinion, is the reason behind this book being a wasted opportunity to explore a novel concept. I'm not sure if there was a rush to get the book published or the editor not having someone on staff who could wade through the author's prose.

The structure of this book is well, nonexistent. The chapters and sections within chapters are not arranged in any discernible manner. The content is not arranged thematically or chronologically. The content moves back and forth from the past to the present in the space of a paragraph. The author is speaking about a certain author or philosopher at one moment and then erratically moves on to the next subject with little discernible connective tissue. I got the feeling that one does when a child is given the opportunity to show a new person his room; moving excitedly from one object to the next, rapidly (and partially) explaining what something is before moving on to the next thing that catches his eye.

There are so many ways that this book could have been more properly structured. For example, the author could have selected a few regions or countries or groups or individuals to serve as case studies for why they are filled with this contemporary rage. There are so many examples to choose from. Al Qaeda is a great example because bin Laden was upset about how coalition troops were stationed in Saudi Arabia. Talk about how Japan was forced to modernize and trade with the West. Talk about how Arab countries were ashamed because they lost the Six Day War to an Israel backed with Western technology. Talk about how modern Iran has been victim to Western incursions and had their democratically-elected leaders overthrown by foreign coups. Pick a few that suit your aims and talk about how those events impact the present. A few, well-selected, in-depth case studies would have greatly aided in the author's thesis.

Next, this book would have greatly benefitted from inter-disciplinary work. I acknowledge that the author cited numerous philosophical, literary and religious texts. However, very few readers are intimately familiar with the works of Rousseau or Locke. The inclusion of obscure Indian religious texts is assuredly a conceptual bridge too far. What I had in mind in particular was the use of psychology. If you are going to talk about individuals being consumed by rage, it would be beneficial to talk about what occurs physiologically when someone is angry. Why do they become angry? How much is one's environment involved? Are there factors that make individuals more or less susceptible (education, geography, age, socio-economics, genetics, etc) to fits of rage? Perhaps talk about certain people that became consumed with rage (terrorists, politicians, writers, etc) and do a deep-dive into what made them tick.

Another considerable gripe that I have with this book is the overall pedantic vibe that emanates from the pages. Most pages are filled with references to esoteric information, obscure SAT-style words, lesser-known Latin terms in Italics, and B-list historical celebrities. We get it, author - you're a smart guy (or at least someone that has access to a thesaurus set to max difficulty). You don't need to wow me, seriously. I am a firm believer that writers should not water-down their vocabulary when writing. I'm a big boy and can clap-out the challenging words. However, when these vocabulary and reference land mines are interspersed throughout clunky prose, then you do your readers a tremendous disservice.

The statements made by the author throughout the work are haphazardly painted in broad strokes and are unsupported by evidence. For example, what does one make of this statement:

"The early impact on Africa's tradition-minded societies of a West organized for profit and power is memorably summed up by the title of Chinua Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958)".

Okay, forget that I, along with most high school students, have read the aforementioned book. The part that I want to know is how does anyone make such a sweeping, non-sensical generalization based on the title of a book? (I did point out that the editor failed this author, right?)

With all that being said, I am in my own 'Age of Anger' after having attempted to read (1/3 of) this book. I feel cheated out of a learning experience on a topic that is urgent and noteworthy. I guess I will have to wait for some other author to come along and produce a more structured, lucid analysis of modern angst.

HBalikov says

"They have counterbalanced their loss of nerve before the political challenge of terrorism with overreaction, launching military campaigns, often without bothering to secure the consent of a frightened people, and while supporting despotic leaders they talk endlessly of their superior 'values' – a rhetoric that has now blended into a white-supremacist hatred, lucratively exploited by Trump, of immigrants, refugees and Muslims (and, often, those who just 'look' Muslim). Meanwhile, selfie-seeking young murderers everywhere confound the leaden stalkers of 'extremist ideology', retaliating to bombs from the air with choreographed slaughter on the ground."

We live, as they say, in "interesting times." Many of us are trying to make sense out of what swirls around us. For those, Mishra has a big answer that not only explains the present but spans the past several centuries.

He certainly sees Voltaire as self-interested hypocrite who could preach tolerance while sitting on the laps of dictators. He gives several shout-outs to Rousseau for his exposure of this hypocrisy as well as predicting what would happen if we ventured far down the road of pure capitalism.

Mishra highlights the current world of a small circle of "haves" and a much larger circle of "have-nots." In this larger circle are the dispossessed, the refugees and those without hope for a better life. He points out that much of what we see in ISIS was part of post World War I Italy.

"Today, as alienated radicals from all over the world flock to join violent, misogynist and sexually transgressive movements, and political cultures elsewhere suffer the onslaught of demagogues, D'Annunzio's secession – moral, intellectual and aesthetic as well as military – from an evidently irredeemable society seems a watershed moment in the history of our present: one of many enlightening conjunctures that we have forgotten."

And I am grateful to him for tying some of the present to elements of the past. We must ask ourselves if our actions or beliefs have contributed to where we find ourselves now. Bakunin and the Russian Revolution is another stop along the trail for Mishra.

"Many of Bakunin's anarchist and terrorist followers revealed the depth of a revolutionary lust that has broken free of traditional constraints and disdains to offer a vision of the future – a lust that seeks satisfaction through violence and destruction alone. Incarnated today by the maniacs of ISIS, it seems to represent absolute evil. But, as Voegelin once argued: This new absoluteness of evil, however, is not introduced into the situation by the revolutionary; it is the reflex of the actual despiritualization of the society from which the revolutionary emerges. The revolutionary crisis of our age is distinguished from earlier revolutions by the fact that the spiritual substance of Western society has diminished to the vanishing point, and that the vacuum does not show any signs of refilling from new sources."

Yet, in defining the smugness of liberal democracy, Mishra is seemingly at a loss to suggest anything to replace it. He can point out that there is value in "tradition" and a society with religious values may offer some grounding, but whether or not his diagnosis is sound, he seems (after more than 600 pages) unable to define a path to peace and prosperity for more of us.

Thanks, but I could have appreciated this point of view in a more condensed version.

Inderjit Sanghera says

I first became aware of Pankaj Mishra's political writings in his articulate rebuttal of Niall Ferguson's asinine historical justification for empire. I was therefore keen to read 'Age of Anger', Mishra's exploration of how myth of European enlightenment and the ideas it espouses; equality, liberty and fraternity only ever really applied to a small strata of humanity.

Well-researched and accessible there are several key themes to Mishra's story. The first is that the enlightenment, rather than being a tool to bring about equality to mankind, was instead an excuse for colonialism, a blunt tool with which Europeans could state they were 'civilising' backward states and societies, a way in which they could disguise their subjugation as liberation. The second, and perhaps most important, is that in giving mankind the realisation that it was a master of its own feet, the enlightenment both liberated and entrapped mankind, or in liberating the mind it made it aware of the greater enslavement it faced—that of the society and state. This is at the root cause of what Mishra terms anarchism, a desire borne out of a sense of deep alienation and disaffection, and the root cause of acts of terrorism, whether it be 19th

century Russian revolutionaries or modern day Islamic terrorists, the causes which they fight for-Islam, Communism, nationalism or fascism are largely irrelevant, what truly drives them is the desire to overthrow the social order stemming from a deep sense of dissatisfaction with their place in the world; ; freedom is seen as being as much of a burden as it is a boon.

Mishra also argues that the homogenising nature of globalisation has caused a crisis in the countries whose cultures, languages and histories it is over-taking. As countries see their identities ripped apart under the relentless wheels of capitalism, so they begin to double-down on what they perceive as the spirit and nature of their culture, hiding behind localised (and often incorrect) myths and vulgar strong-men. Indeed it is this tension between the perceived elites who run politics and democracy for their own gain which is behind the rise in demagoguery and populism, whose outward brashness and bravado hides a deep sense of insecurity.

A perceptive analysis of the root causes of not just past injustice but also the present predicament the world finds itself in.

Bettie? says

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08flm2j>

Description: *In a ground-breaking new analysis, Pankaj Mishra traces the tangled roots of hatreds and nationalisms across the world.*

Inspired by Hindu nationalists in his own country, the rise of the so-called Islamic State, the emergence of Donald Trump as a candidate for President, as well as Brexit, the author attempts to re-examine the divided modern world.

Mishra looks at historical events from the industrial revolution to the French revolution, from the writings of philosophers to the end of the Cold War. Indeed, at the end of the Cold War, there was a belief that the global capitalist economy would alleviate ethnic and religious differences to usher in prosperity and peace. This belief, he states, now lies in tatters, with no alternative in sight, and with economic power shifting from the West. Meanwhile, the IMF suggests that emerging economies will take much longer to catch up economically with the West than was previously believed.

Further, Mishra looks at nationalism, alienation, xenophobia, the 'lone wolf' and the pack behind him, domestic terrorism and the frustration and resentment both aimed at the West and from those in the West who are alienated.

He introduces us to the people at the heart of much of the action as we discover the causes and consequences of their beliefs and their actions.

Amrit Zoad says

This writer lives in his own world. I am an Indian and everyone voted for Modi because he promised change

from a corrupt monarchy-type government. He didn't say a single thing against the minorities during his election campaign. And the majority with which he won, apparently states that even most of the 20% Indian Muslims voted him. It will be a foolish idea to compare him with Trump whose main arguments for winning the elections were based on racism and communal hatred.

Modi's mottos: Developement of the India, Make in India

Trump's mottos: Build a wall and make Mexico pay for it, Temporary ban on Muslims

The writer should understand that the misinformation he is feeding to the non-Indians will not be fruitful for anyone.

BlackOxford says

How the World Feels

Identifying the fictions in which we live is an awkward matter, mainly because it involves creating an alternative fiction. And comparing the merits of competing stories is tricky. Each story carries with it its own criterion of verification and presents its facts accordingly: Jews are responsible for our financial problems; look at all the Jewish names in banking. Muslims are educated to hate us; proven by the Q'uran. Immigrants undermine society; drugs come from the same places they do.

'Fact-checking' these sorts of narratives is unproductive. The problem isn't one of falsehood but of incompleteness. One way to judge such a narrative therefore is its inclusion of more facts than its competitors. Particularly telling is the inclusion of apparently contradictory facts which are otherwise unexplained: The Jewish names on the door front largely Christian organizations. The Bible is as casually and inhumanely brutal as anything in the Q'uran. Immigrants and drugs come from the places that have been impoverished through globalization.

Mishra's technique for creating a more 'inclusive' narrative is to start with an aesthetic judgement rather than a thesis: "... *ressentiment as the defining feature of a world... where the modern promise of equality collides with massive disparities of power, education, status, and property ownership.*" He then lets rip on a journey through culture and its present discontents, drawing in as many facts as he can handle, and that's quite a few. He considers himself a "stepchild of the West" as well as an Asian. Only a few are likely to have his breadth of cultural experience, so his choice of *ressentiment* as the key to global sentiment seems inspired to me.

Mishra's opinion is that this pervasive feeling of disappointment and fear is the result of the collapse in the principle of "historic inevitability" that was the foundation of not just Marxism, but also of the liberal and neo-liberal believers in free market progress. Both socialism and capitalism have created societies in which material advantage has been offset by enormous economic, racial, and sexual inequities. What young, thinking, even vaguely aware, person could avoid the conclusion that those in charge are either frauds or crooks? The road to both ISIS and the Alt-right are paved with thwarted idealism. Contingency not fate rules the world.

It is the young especially who perceive the absurd gap between any ideology that suggests it knows the destination of human society and the obvious mess of reality. Neither proletarian nor consumer utopia has ever been in sight; the Second Coming has been unconscionably delayed. And if the narratives of ideology as

well as religion are bust, then “*Nothing less than this [Enlightenment] sense of expectation, central to modern political and economic thinking, has gone missing today, especially among those who have themselves never had it so good.*” Neither body nor spirit provides a foothold for supporting intelligent life. A sort of negative idealism, a rampant nihilism, beckons. Mishra quotes Walter Benjamin for effect: the self alienation of humankind “*has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.*”

Could there be a better confirmation of this claim than Trump, a man who fits Benjamin’s description exactly (although elected only after Age of Anger was already with the publisher)? If not, then it is essential to recognise Trump not as anomaly but as epitome. He is what we have become, in all his vileness. He is a symbol, one hopes not of the moral standards of modern society, but certainly of the existential deficiency of all of our conventional political and cultural narratives. As surely as Kant, Trump deserves the title of *der alles Zermalmender*, the All-destroyer.

It is fatuous to think that some sort of familiar normality will return with Trump’s departure, no matter when that takes place. The myths of the past - American democracy, indeed liberal democracy, as a natural end-state; increasingly rational international cooperation in the furtherance of mutual interest; the universality of human interests themselves; the possibility of global rule of common law - are no longer tenable and not worth the treaties they’re written in.

Ressentiment is a symptom of despair among populations who still long for the comforts these myths provide. Their loss makes us all sick, although it is generally the young (and the psychotic) who act out most readily. It is the young (and the psychotic) who first spot how facile and self-satisfied these myths are. The rest of us resist like the Boers resisted in South Africa, by doubling down on the myths. Hence the apparent paradox of simultaneously increasing secularisation and religious fundamentalism - in Alabama, and Moscow, as well as Aleppo; the economic dissatisfaction among those who are the wealthiest on the planet; the drive to roll back democratic institutions by those democratically elected to safeguard them.

Can we exist as cognitively gifted social animals without myths? Highly unlikely. Can we find better ones? Possibly, if we can only get past the kind of either/or dualisms that infest so much of our culture and are embedded in our institutions: Christianity defines itself essentially as ‘not-Jewish’; the monotheistic God is most fundamentally not his creation; the rational is that which is logical rather than that which is important; will, desire, and faith are personal possessions and not communally owned; European institutions (one thinks of the modern corporation) have proven themselves superior by their proliferation; wrongs must be righted, if necessary by employing more wrongs.

The Age of Anger is far too rich with historical, literary, and cultural facts to summarise easily. Its conclusions are less than precise and directive. But I find this both consistent and convincing rather than a flaw. It is a narrative which denies its own definitiveness and begs for additions and modifications and reversals. Perhaps it is a model for the kind of myth we now need to keep us from exterminating one another.

Peter McLoughlin says

Very well written history on the challenge to modernity by tribalism, romanticism, fascism, and nihilism. It is the complaint against the materialistic modern secular liberal enlightenment dream. It has been countered by these movements since the 1700s in various ugly irrationalities. They seem to flare up just after times when cosmopolitan elites thought they had everything sewed up. It characteristically values tribe, violence,

manhood, spirit, action, irrationality, wildness, blood, and soil. It seems these movements have existed as a challenge to the enlightenment rationality and cosmopolitanism and although take different forms in times and places it is the same reactionary retreat from the kingdom of reason. We are in a time where it has the upper hand again be it Brexit, Trump, Modi, Putin the forces of anger are on the march.

Joachim Stoop says

"Today, the belief in progress, necessary for life in a Godless universe, can no longer be sustained, except, perhaps, in the Silicon Valley mansions of baby-faced millennials. [...] In an economically stagnant world that offers a dream of individual empowerment to all, but no realizable dreams of political change, the lure of active nihilism can only grow."

This book is so insightful: just like a zooming-in from outer space 'till we see our little blue planet, it pinpoints our present age in an historic timeline with reoccurring themes and problems and with some great known and lesser known thinkers who phrase things in the 18th and 19th century about society, as if it was written today.

It is not an easy read because of the associative writing style and the many jumps in time and geography. But it is an absolute must for all who wants to get a firmer grip on what's happening lately.

Chapter 1: 6 stars

Chapter 2: 5

Chapter 3: 5

Chapter 4: 3

Chapter 5: 3

Chapter 6: 4

Chapter 7: 5

Khush says

Sometimes present circumstances force us to hold back and reflect and make sense of the world. In 'Age of Anger' Mishra looks at the contemporary world and its discontents; the Brexit and the escalation of far-right forces across the globe but particularly in the west. While all this seems new, unprecedented- a direct outcome of global mingling that turned supremely problematic for many (western) countries: immigration, terrorism, jobs- this chaos produced demagogues of all kinds from Erdogan, Le Pen, Modi and Trump to tap into the simmering reservoirs of cynicism and discontent across countries.

The books central theses in Mishra own words;

"This book takes a very different view of a universal crisis, shifting the preposterously heavy burden of explanation from Islam and religious extremism. it argues that the unprecedeted political, economic and social disorder that accompanied the rise of the industrial capitalist economy in the 19th century Europe, and led to world wars, totalitarian regimes and genocide in the first half of the 20th century, is now infecting much vaster regions and bigger populations: that, first exposed to modernity through European imperialism, large parts of Asia and Africa are now plunging deeper into the West's own fateful experience of that

modernity."

Mishra delves deeper in modern history especially from mid 18th century onwards and cites a broad range of writers, philosophers, political upheavals, important events, wars, massacres and so forth to show that the transformation to modernity even within the West was anything but peaceful. He gives very specific examples from French, Italian and German history. With industrialization, Europe created great wealth, however, not everyone was invited to the party. Since the elite within Europe remained very tiny, the masses lived in penury and migrated from their home countries. They ran from homebred conflicts, poverty, and persecutions to America. More scientific developments further strengthened the tiny elite and increased their power over the masses; both within Europe, and eastwards in the form decisive colonialism. All this eventually culminated into two most lethal (global) wars mankind has known.

The book makes an easy read, though it is a scholarly work. As I went on reading this book, I also felt a bit depressed. 'What is happening today has happened before' is what this book is about. It suggests that nobody is a hero here. As one looks at today's world; it is amazing to see how much progress has been made in the fields of space travel; medicine, robotic technology, education and so forth; but when it comes to basic human characteristics in regard to love, compassion, evil, we are still primitive. Nothing much has changed in these spheres since Plato.

Hadrian says

Like the ghosts of the dead, 2016 is with us. Donald Trump is still with us, Brexit is still with us, the forces of economic anxiety and racial prejudice are still with us, the howls of rage from the dispossessed, across Middle America and the factory towns of North England are still with us, the siren songs of nationalism and protectionism and wall-building and the contempt for cities and the hatred of the educated and the decadent and moderately prosperous and the different are still with us. Pankaj Mishra writes that they have been with us for much longer.

Mishra's thesis, taken broadly, is that the sequence of events in the past quarter century - first the triumph of free market liberalism, and then a sequence of populist movements, resentment, and political violence convulsion, is the most recent stanza of a pattern that has occurred since the 19th century. A society organized around naked self-interest leads to the benefits of a few and the expense of many others. This reaction to the structural inequality of market liberalism, industrialization, and the situation of 'modernity' bubbles over into resentment, tribalism, and often violence.

This is an intellectual history, and Mishra's presentation of 19th century European thinkers showcases some uncomfortable similarities to contemporary anxieties. Revolutionaries, anarchists, xenophobes, have beliefs that are only too familiar, repeated in the anger of some nationalist or extremist today. Take the 'Futurist Manifesto', where Marinetti calls for the destruction of museums, libraries, and contempt of women - too much like ISIS. Think of radical anarchists who set off bombs in public squares and assassinated heads of state as 'propaganda of the deed' is an echo of modern terrorism, in London or Paris. Or, for another example German nationalists who held 'rootless cosmopolitans' and 'finance' in contempt, called for "holy war", and resented the power and influence of their French neighbors. The attempts to create an imaginary golden age - see Bannon or Le Pen talking about how 'strong nations' make 'strong neighbors', or how Jean-Jacques Rousseau idealized Sparta.

This book does not end on an upbeat note, and the author is rightfully suspicious of those who claim to have

all the answers. Too many Utopian movements have gone awry for him to make that mistake. But this is a thorough investigation of our times, and one worth thinking about, and then acting on.

Maru Kun says

All round the planet excitement is mounting as people get ready for the first “World Cup of Ideas” of the 21St Century.

The 20th Century saw this contest held three times, starting with a hard fought championship in France in 1914. The kickoff for the next round was Poland in 1939 while the surprise venue to start the third and final match of the last century was Fulton, Missouri in 1946, starting only a year after the last match had finished.

As always the Liberal-Democrat-Cosmopolitans are expecting to do well, fielding some top notch players known to us all. We should see the highly talented Frenchman Francois-Marie Arouet (better known to his fans by the nickname ‘Voltaire’) take the forward spot. He will be ably supported by mid-field mood-maker Emmanuel Kant playing alongside the solid Jeremy Bentham. Diderot and Montesquie will be out on the wings with the rest of the team made up from other well known players from the Enlightenment League. This is a team that loves to play with ideas and their supporters are expecting great things.

The problem with the Liberal-Democrat-Cosmopolitans (whose fans call them the “Philosophes”) is, of course, identical to the problem faced by Brazilian football team: they are a great team on paper with individual players guaranteed to give 110 percent but they all have their own style of play, rarely work well together and just don’t seem able to maintain the same team-discipline as their main rivals, the Anti-Modernist-Nativist-Authoritarians (to their fans, the ‘Nationalists’). The Nationalists are well known for sticking together and playing ruthlessly on the field even if their individual skills just aren’t at the same level.

A lot of supporters are blaming the recent poor run of the Philosophes on their merger with the Liberal-Capitalist team around thirty years ago. Its certainly true that we’ve seen a lot of shabby tactics from them since then, with players like Adam Smith or John Locke hogging space in front of the goal mouth and not letting the rest of the team get a look in.

This trend has lost the Philosophes a lot of fans. After all, except for some very rich season ticket holders, who wants to go to a match where Voltaire is left in the dressing room while Milton Friedman plays up front? Some of the fan base are so turned off they’ve even gone back to the Socialist-Communist team (known as the “Reds” after their supporters’ favorite color) even though the Reds placed bottom when the last Cup ended in 1989.

Part of the drama of a good World Cup of Ideas is seeing Voltaire up against his arch rival on the Nationalist team, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Knowing that they are both French, that they played head-to-head for top teams in the Enlightenment League while also knowing that they hate each other with a passion off the field just adds to the spectator’s enjoyment.

Although the ‘Nationalists’ have Rousseau on their team the rest of their players are far less well known. We expect to see them field a mixed team with a bias towards German and Italian players: Gabriele D’Annunzio, Giusseppe Mazzini, Joseph-Arthur de Gobineau, Adam Mickiewicz, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Herbert Spencer, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar are all expected to catch the manager’s eye along with a few less well known players.

Just like in previous competitions, this century we expect both the Philosophes and the Nationalists to make a pitch for the controversial but incredibly talented young German player from Saxony in Prussia: Friedrich Nietzsche. Some fans say Nietzsche is good enough to swing the balance in favor of any team he plays for but Nietzsche's critics complain that it's often difficult to tell which side he is actually on. Either way we can be pretty sure he will be taking to the field for this Cup as well.

It's time to touch on an important subject that comes up in every World Cup of Ideas. That subject is Hooliganism. I am sorry to have to report that, yet again, the offending supporters are all fans of the Nationalist team.

It's often said that Nationalist fans don't know and don't even care who is playing on their side in the World Cup of Ideas because they are just there looking for a fight. It is sad, but true, that if you asked the average Nationalist in the US, the UK, France, India, Turkey or wherever who Giusseppe Mazzini or Johann Gottlieb Fichte is they would struggle to answer you.

Supreme (but often misplaced) confidence in their own team's abilities doesn't seem to stop the Nationalist fans playing dirty in the pre-tournament fixtures. In recent years we've seen them beating up other fans, taking over the sound system around the pitch and even trying to hack the score board thinking that no one would notice. This behavior has got to stop.

Despite overall poor placing in past matches the Anarchist/Nihilist team (the "Blacks" to their fans) is also expected to be well represented in the up-and-coming Cup.

The Blacks always amuse the crowd with their antics on the field of play given how they love to kick the ball in random directions and are often tackling members of their own team. This can be dangerous to watch though, as they have been known to attack the spectators much like Eric Cantona with his famous drop kick in the 1995 Manchester United v Crystal Palace game. While they might please the crowd their erratic play means the Blacks often disappoint and I wouldn't put money on them even getting to the semi-finals.

The Reds are still a weak team after their defeat at the end of the last century. They have been steadily losing fans, mainly to the Nationalists and the Blacks. There is even some talk that their star player from Trier in Prussia, Karl Marx, might be waiting for the transfer market to open up so he can make a move to the Nationalists team or even the Philosophes.

As anyone following the World Cup of Ideas knows the choice of venue is still wide open. Europe has always been a popular location ever since the tournament was first held in France in 1789, but where the next championship will start is anyone's guess.

The leading contender is a brand new location for the fixture: the South China Sea. The Korean Peninsular nearby is also a possible location, as is Kashmir. That perennial favorite "somewhere in the Middle East" is never out of contention.

A few fans have suggested that the next World Cup of Ideas should be a purely domestic fixture held in the US, with a team of Liberal Democrat Cosmopolitans from the coasts (the 'Liberals') playing a team of Nativist, Evangelical Authoritarians drawn from the American South and mid-West (the 'Rednecks').

This sounds like a rerun of a much earlier Championship of Ideas that kicked off in 1861 in South Carolina but which only had regional match status rather than being a full World Cup. It looks unlikely that the US would be the venue for the very first Cup in the 21st Century, but you never know. If things continue as they

are in the US it could well be a venue for the next fixture after that.

Well, that's just about it for my round up of prospects for the next World Cup of Ideas.

If you would like a more detailed guide to the forthcoming championship then "The Age of Anger" is a great place to start. It has profiles of many of the players and is a good guide to how they performed in earlier matches. It also has a run down of each team's strengths and weaknesses and useful commentary on how they might perform when the next round starts.

No point sitting on the sidelines anymore. Pick your team and get out there with your support.

PS:

This article in The Guardian suggests this book will be well worthwhile.

Also a one hour interview with the author at the RSA is here

Susan says

Without doubt, this is a topical book, in a world which has seen a US President elected on a wave of intolerant rhetoric and the UK voting to leave the EU; a world at war, with so many people displaced and extremism rife. The author of this book attempts to re-examine the divided, modern world; inspired by Hindu nationalists in his own country, the rise of the Islamic State, the emergence of Donald Trump as a (then) candidate for President, as well as Brexit.

In 1968, Hannah Arendt wrote, "for the first time in history, all peoples on earth have a common present." With the internet relaying every event, plus reactions to it, around the world; never has this comment felt more true. Globalisation means that every country is affected by the shock of events in other countries – whether they are near neighbours, or at the opposite ends of the world. In this book, Pankaj Mishra has gone back to the past to help understand the present.

Mishra looks at historical events from the industrial revolution to the French revolution, from the writings of philosophers to the end of the Cold War. Indeed, at the end of the Cold War, there was a belief that the global capitalist economy would alleviate ethnic and religious differences and would usher in prosperity and peace. This belief, he states, now lies in tatters, with no alternative in sight, and with economic power shifting from the West. Meanwhile, the IMF suggests that emerging economies will take much longer to catch up economically with the West than was previously believed.

During this book, the author looks at nationalism, alienation, xenophobia, the 'lone wolf' and the pack behind him, domestic terrorism and the frustration and resentment both aimed at the West and from those in the West who are alienated. This is an interesting account which attempts to explain the state of the world through looking at historical events that precede our present times. Any lover of history will know that history not only helps explain the present, but that current events have probably happened before; albeit in a different form. I cannot say this is an uplifting read but, if you look at the news and feel despair, this book will help put events in a historical context and make them a little more understandable.

Omar Ali says

(This review, with screenshots and proper formatting, is at <http://brownpundits.blogspot.com/2017...>)

Pankaj Mishra is a British-Indian writer and public intellectual who currently lives between London and Mashobra and writes regularly for publications like the NY Times and the NYRB. He started his career as a promising literary critic (Naipaul was initially impressed) but soon switched to "native informant" mode, presenting and interpreting what he described as the angst, atomization, envy and ressentiment of newly emerging and fitfully modernizing India; a phenomenon that other elite commentators and foreign visitors were presumably failing to notice. He then expanded this theme to all of Asia and has finally graduated to interpreting the Metropole to the metropolitans themselves. This could have been a somewhat risky move, since Western reviewers who received his reports about the darker nations relatively uncritically, might well know enough about their home turf to become critical. But by and large, that has not happened; reviews have generally been favorable.

This is not one of those favorable reviews.

I found the book tendentious, shallow and repetitive, with quotes and facts cherry-picked from across his vast (but chronologically limited and highly Eurocentric) reading list, full of unfounded assumptions and opinions that are casually passed off with an "as everyone knows" air in practically every paragraph.

The book begins with a brief account of D'Annunzio's occupation of Fiume in 1919. This relatively obscure episode is sprinkled with cherry-picked quotes and while the facts are mostly true, their significance is asserted rather than proven. This pattern is followed throughout the book; vast historical claims (e.g. that modernity led ultimately, not just transiently, to more immiseration in Europe; "First manifested in 19th century Europe - Bursts of technological innovation and growth offset by systemic exploitation and widespread immiseration") are casually asserted as if they are already known and accepted by all sane-thinking people. There is no systematic description of what happened economically, socially or culturally in Europe (or elsewhere) in the last 200 years, and no data is ever offered to support any claims, but since these claims (sometimes stated, frequently just hinted at) are almost all prevalent (if only vaguely and without systematic evidence) in postmodern liberal European (and Westernized Desi) circles, so the book gets a pass in those circles; but the fact is that if you stop and dig into any random claim, the tone and the details will not pass muster.

It could be objected that this is not the point of the book. As Pankaj himself puts it:

"This book is not offered as an intellectual history; and it cannot even pose, given its brevity, as a single narrative of the origin and diffusion of ideas and ideologies that assimilates the many cultural and political developments of the previous two centuries. Rather, it explores a particular climate of ideas, a structure of feeling, and cognitive disposition, from the age of Rousseau to our own age of anger"

He goes on to say "It tries to show how an ethic of individual and collective empowerment spread itself over the world, as much through resentful imitation as coercion, causing severe dislocations, social maladjustment and political upheaval. "

Marx said it better but this is not bad either. But unlike Marx, who offered a diagnosis and then a prescription (right or wrong), Pankaj goes on to dig through 200 years of (mostly European) intellectual history to find quotes and episodes that bewail this process of destruction of the old in action; but he never offers a diagnosis of why human beings and human societies created modernity in the first place (after all, even Europeans, or rather Anglo-Americans, who appear in this book as the only people who actually do

things instead of just reacting to things being done to them, are also humans); nor does he offer any ideas about what an alternative may look like. What he does add to the diagnosis of some of the authors he quotes is a relentless focus on ressentiment as the quintessential human emotion; the secret sauce that explains everything that Pankaj does not like about the world today, from Trump and Modi to Erdogan and, somewhat surprisingly, the New York Review of Books ("a major intellectual periodical of Anglo-America").

Resentment and envy drive everything in Pankaj-world. Herder and Fichte, for example, are "young provincials in Germany.. who simmered with resentment against a metropolitan civilization of slick movers and shakers that seemed to deny them a rooted and authentic existence". This motif is repeated with variations throughout the book. Everyone (except the Anglo-Americans of course) is endlessly burning with resentment and hates who they are. It almost makes one wonder if the book is really about Pankaj digging through 200 years of intellectual history to find his own mirror image everywhere? But this would be to psychologize, and one should try to avoid that, even if Pankaj never does.

Perhaps all this would be fine if he was suitably humble about his own limitations, but of course, he is no such thing. There is a consistent tone of "I have discovered what all of you fools missed" throughout the book. That tone is grating, partly because what he has discovered is not very original, and partly because it is by no means certain that his assessment of the Enlightenment and its major thinkers is the correct assessment. I think it likely that the specialist who specializes in any thinker cited in this book will disagree with the flippant generalizations and cherry-picked quotes, but given that this treatment is being meted out to dozens of thinkers from across the globe and the specialist knows only his own, he may not realize that Pankaj is equally shallow about all of them. For example, he sums up Montesquieu, Adam Smith, Voltaire and Kant on one go with the dismissive "the universal commercial society of self-interested rational individuals that was originally advocated by such Enlightenment thinkers as Montesquieu, Adam Smith, Voltaire and Kant"; is this really a fair and reasonable summary of all that those subtle and profound thinkers wrote and thought? I think it is certainly part of what they said, but Pankaj has no use for their other insights. What he needs for his purposes is the code words "commercial, self-interested, rational". He knows these will do their magic within his (superficially anti-capitalist) audience, and he is probably right.

Of course, doubts and misgivings about modernity have been the subject of countless works ever since the terms were invented. In fact, the reason Rousseau, Nietzsche and company are one of the two groups who dominate the quote-mining in this book (terrorists and anarchists are the other) is precisely because they did produce works that questioned and critiqued many Enlightenment assumptions. Pankaj, with his focus on resentment and envy is, if anything, a much more limited and shallow version of their work. This may sound harsh, but this book is really little more than a disorganized dictionary of selected (sometimes misleadingly so) quotations and sweeping generalizations about writers who generally thought deeper and harder than Pankaj does. So my suggestion, dear reader, is, why not read them?

Which brings us to another problem with this book; its complete lack of interest in all human history before 1688 and in all civilizations except the European civilization of the last 200 years. Again, one may say that they are not the subject of the book, but the problem goes deeper than that. Not only are they not the subject of the book, it seems that they are not of interest to Pankaj at all. He never shows any interest (or awareness) of humans as biological beings, evolved over millennia, with instincts, drives and abilities shaped by that evolution far more than they can ever be shaped by "modernity", whatever that may be. He is not interested in 10,000 years of human cultural evolution or in the vast literature on the evolution of political order. And he seems to regard all non-European (or perhaps non-Anglo-American) civilizations as interchangeable place holders for "tradition", trammelled under the boot of modernity. That China and the Chinese, for example, may not be exact counterparts of his native India, and may even be a civilization that regards itself (justifiably) as a world-leader, a source of many "modern" ideas, fully capable (and desirous) of joining the

modern world on its own terms. But these are not notions to be found in Pankaj-land. To him, all non-Europeans are simply interchangeable primitives; "traditional" people driven by resentment and envy and, more to the point, doomed to fakery, imitation and disappointment.

Finally, there is the issue of conscious (or unconscious?) manipulation of facts and anecdotes to fit his agenda. Pankaj seems to know the prejudices and vague preconceptions of his postmodern Eurocentric audience, and he never misses a chance to push their buttons, even if it requires some subtle alteration of events. A few random quotes will illustrate this tendency:

"Turkeys Erdogan to India's Modi, France's Le Pen and America's Donald Trump, have tapped into the simmering reservoirs of cynicism, boredom and discontent". Discontent, yes, but cynicism and boredom? Other than sounding good to his audience, how much sense does this really make?

Speaking of the 1990s "The Dalai Lama appeared in Apple's "Think different" advertisements and it seemed only a matter of time before Tibet, too, would be free". Did it? really? to whom? The only reason this sentence appealed to him is because it presses the right buttons. The Dalai Lama, check. Evil corporation Apple, check. Advertisement, check. Sheeple being fooled yet again, check. It is a theme, and it recurs.

He casually claims that the first televised beheading occurred "in 2004, (just as broadband began to arrive in middle-class homes) in Iraq, of a Western hostage dressed in an orange Guantanamo jumpsuit". This is another classic example of Pankaj in action. It is hard to believe that he has not heard (or did not learn while Googling) that the televised beheading of journalist Daniel Pearl happened two years earlier in 2002; but that beheading was in Pakistan, involved Jew-hatred and did not include an orange Guantanamo jumpsuit. So it doesn't really evoke instant anti-imperialist memes in the way the Iraq invasion and Guantanamo jumpsuits do, so the example chosen has to be Iraq in 2004. And the "broadband arriving in middle class homes" is the cherry on the subliminal messaging cake. This is a minor point, but it is worth noting that even in the case of minor points, the rhetorical needs of Pankaj's overall project are going to be paramount. The reader has to be on his guard.

"only on the rarest occasions in recent decades has it been acknowledged that the history of modernization is largely one of carnage and bedlam rather than peaceful convergence". First of all, it is by no means certain that this history is "largely one of carnage and bedlam", but among those who think this is true, this has been the fashionable view for decades. Pankaj does not get to announce this as new news to the in-crowd.

"Wrought by the West's transition to industrial capitalism and mass politics..". We know he is against capitalism. Perhaps against industry as well. But is he also against mass politics? Pankaj will not say "the people" are ignorant, easily manipulated fools, but he is never too far from implying exactly that. It would be hugely interesting if he went deeper into this topic and reached some philosophically interesting (and perhaps even controversial) conclusions (aristocratic ones? under that "man of the people from Jhansi" exterior?) but this is another reason I am not a fan of his books. You get the party line, and nothing but the party line. The message is in fact NEVER controversial or new or shocking. it is exactly tailored to fit current postliberal fashions and where those fashions are internally contradictory, Pankaj will not venture. Sad!

By the way, he thinks Pope Francis is the "most convincing and influential public intellectual today". Convincing? to whom? and MOST influential??

When it comes to Islam, he is even more predictable and safe. The following, for example, is a fairly typical

example of clueless Euoliberal apologetics, and Pankaj may even know better, but he knows what buttons to push, so here it is.

(Osama and Zarqawi, not to speak of Al-Baghdadi, who has a PhD in Islamic studies, do in fact know a lot about the Islam of their ancestors. that the foot soldiers don't know the theological details is neither here nor there; foot soldiers of other ideologies don't know either)

He is not always wrong. In fact he is frequently perfectly correct, but in a trite and almost trivial way. For example, he says (correctly in my view) that "those routinely evoking a worldwide clash of civilizations in which Islam is pitted against the West, and religion against reason, are not able to explain many political, social and environmental ills". Yes, but to hear him say it, you would think everyone except Pankaj thinks this is the case. But in fact, hardly any liberal commentators see this as the main explanatory framework for the world today. Debunking this to a liberal audience (and there is no other audience for this book) seems like the easiest of easy shots, not worth wasting 350 pages. But that is the problem with the book: in the end, it is just dumbed down propaganda, preaching to the converted, telling them what they already believed, but making them feel like they are participating in the unmasking of some deep and meaningful secret. This formula surely works as a way to sell books and get good reviews. But for anyone interested in new information or deeper insights, it is a waste of time. What Scruton said about Foucault's "The order of things" ("an artful book.. a work not of philosophy but of rhetoric") applies to this book too. Which is unfortunate. Pankaj is obviously intelligent and very widely read. He could do something more interesting than just artfully massaging the fashionable prejudices of his class and his audience.

Besides, while he hates this "soul-killing world of mediocrity and cowardice" he is also a Westernized liberal (or post-liberal) who cannot possibly stand alongside, say, the extreme Hindu or Islamic radical who says exactly the same things. To him, those people are justified in their rebellion (though he is not at all sympathetic to the Hindu variety, relatively gentle on the Islamist variety, and most forgiving of the Leftist variety, because of the particular politics of his own peer group) but at the same time he cannot really advocate any "return to traditional mores" because of course, those mores are patriarchal, hierarchical, transphobic etc etc.. Knowing this and knowing his audience, he never goes too far into this problem. But the problem is very real. If modernity is evil, then why not the premodern? And if that too is "problematic", then we have a bigger human issue on our hands and all this handwaving has done nothing to bring us one step closer to a solution.

"Man..can no longer connect cause to effect". OK, but that implies a return to very ancient isolation. Is that the solution? maybe it is, but you won't hear more about it from Pankaj. He presses the button, makes you feel deep, and moves on.

The book is full of this sort of elevated pseudo-discourse..

We end where we began. We need to do something new. But what?
