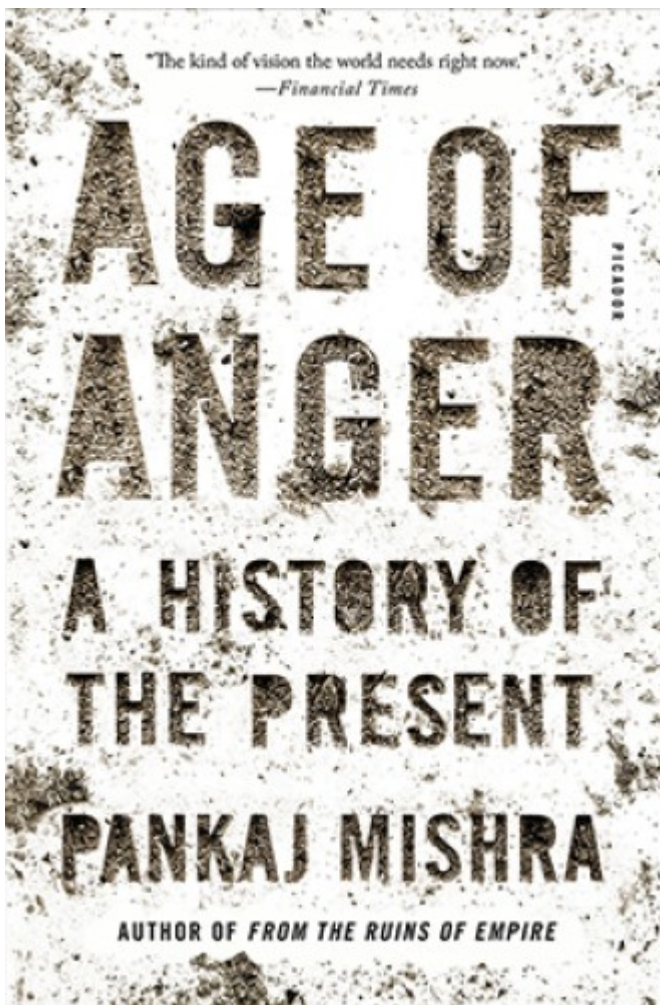


The resentment that capitalist modernity leaves in its wake

What do terrorists and populist nationalists have in common? They're fueled by inequality.

by [Robert Westbrook](#) in the [October 25, 2017](#) issue

In Review



Age of Anger

A History of the Present

By Pankaj Mishra
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Whoever has emerged victorious," wrote Walter Benjamin, "participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. There is no document of civilization which is not at same time a document of barbarism" ("Theses on the Philosophy of History").

For over two decades in several fine books, Indian-born critic Pankaj Mishra has been urging Western readers to listen to Asian and Middle Eastern voices, including his own, speaking "from the ruins of empire" about the costs of liberal capitalist modernity. In *Age of Anger* he asks us to consider the manner in which those voices harmonize to considerable degree with those of earlier generations of writers and artists present at the creation of that modernity in Europe and America. More controversially, he contends that the bitterest of those Western voices, such as that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, echo today in the terrorist manifestos of al-Qaeda and ISIS. Even more controversially, he urges us, up to a point, to take their point.

At the heart of liberal capitalist modernity, Mishra argues, are principles of individualism and formal equality. Upon these are built a set of economic, social, cultural, and political practices: competitive markets, civil liberties, scientific inquiry, religious tolerance, and states governed by representative democracy. Freedom in such a world is negative freedom, the absence of restraint on the pursuit of individual happiness compatible with the same freedom for all others. Proponents of such modernity envision a "universal commercial society of self-interested rational individuals." Quickly gaining hold in 19th-century Europe and America, this understanding of modernity subsequently spread to the rest of the world on the wings of imperial expansion. "Modernization, mostly along capitalist lines, became the universalist creed that glorified the autonomous rights-bearing individual and hailed his rational choice-making capacity as freedom. Economic growth was posited as the end-all of political life and the chief marker of progress worldwide, not to mention the gateway to happiness."

To an extraordinary degree, liberal capitalist modernity has in our time secured global hegemony, both ideologically and practically. "We live today in a vast, homogeneous world market," Mishra observes, "in which human beings are programmed to maximize their self-interest and aspire to the same things, regardless of their difference of cultural background and individual temperament.

The world seems more literate, interconnected, and prosperous than at any other time in history.”

But among the most significant consequences of a world built on a foundation of *formal* equality and individualism are deep and abiding *substantive* inequalities and atomized, often alienated, selfhood. The self-interested, detached, rational individuals of liberal capitalist modernity compete with one another—often ruthlessly and always on unequal terms—to insure that their formal equality is instantly rendered thoroughly abstract and empty. Modernity shattered many of the venerable inequities and hierarchies of traditional societies rooted in fixed, hereditary status. But then a new, more fluid, social order of winners and losers rapidly developed, one marked by stark inequities and hierarchies of wealth and power of its own in all spheres of life. This combination—a claim of equality for all that turns out to be purely formal and a reality for most of profound substantive inequality—has dogged liberal capitalist modernity from the 18th century onward. Moreover, Mishra observes, traditional bonds “could be very oppressive. But they enabled human beings to coexist, deeply imperfectly, in the societies into which they had been born.” Rootlessness and *anomie*, the breakdown of customary social and moral bonds, is the fate of all too many modern men and women left to their own devices in regimes aspiring to “cosmopolitan liberalism.” Endowing everyone equally with the right freely to pursue happiness on their own dime turns out to be a more meager gift than it might first appear, even in America.

The right to pursue happiness on your own dime turns out to be a meager gift.

Mishra is interested in liberal capitalist modernity’s detractors, especially those writers drawn to its siren song only to suffer disappointment. He aims “to make sense of bewildering, and often painful, experiences by reexamining a divided modern world, this time from the perspective of those who came late to it, and felt, as many people do now, left, or pushed, behind.” Above all, he wants to explore and explain the *ressentiment* of such people—“an intense mix of envy and sense of humiliation and powerlessness.” Resentment directed at the strains of competitive individualism, an empty promise of equality, and demoralizing atomism is, he contends, a defining malady of modernization along presumptively enlightened European and American lines. No account of Western modernity is complete without full consideration of the material and psychic damage it has wrought, and the recoil it has elicited.

Mishra is not by any means the first to see the entanglement of modernity's promise and its perils, and he has the good sense to call upon support from Rousseau, Tocqueville, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and others who anticipated his analysis. Had the title not been already taken, he might have called his book *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. What lends Mishra's book distinction is a remarkable breadth of learning across cultures that enables him to trace the path of modernity and the distinctive resentment it has generated from 18th-century Europe to the far corners of our own "globalized" moment. One might think we are hardly in need of yet another summation of *Notes from Underground*, but when Mishra finds the voice of Dostoevsky's narrator reverberating in the lectures of Anwar al-Awlaki, the familiar text takes on new life. To be sure, he writes here (if not elsewhere) mostly of modernity's most articulate resistance, but that is more than enough bile for one book.

Rousseau, Mishra argues, designed the prototype of the resentful critic of modernity and exercised considerable influence over those who followed. He was "present as a critic at the creation of the new individualistic society, pointing to devastating contradictions right in the heart and soul of the bourgeois individual entrusted with progress, and improvising his own militant secessionist solutions." Setting himself against *philosophes* delighted by the progress of commercial society and the fledgling industrial revolution ("I hate you," he wrote to Voltaire in 1760), Rousseau set out in his *Discourse on Inequality* to show that "insatiable ambition, the thirst of raising their respective fortunes, not so much from real want as from the desire to surpass others, inspired all men with a vile propensity to injure one another."

Rousseau knew well of what he spoke, for this "greatest militant lowbrow in history and a guttersnipe of genius" (Isaiah Berlin) wrestled himself with the "pathological inner life" of modernity—establishing the profile of a person caught up in the maelstrom of liberal capitalist modernity: "The uprooted outsider in the commercial metropolis, aspiring for a place in it, and struggling with complex feelings of envy, fascination, revulsion and rejection." Mishra sees in Rousseau and his praise of the solidarity and civic virtue he claimed to find in ancient Sparta the forebear of later terrorists (starting with Robespierre) who nurture nostalgic fantasies of premodern societies and pursue violent schemes of resistance. "Rousseau's notion of Sparta," he notes wryly, "was as historically grounded—and idealized—as the Caliphate of radical Islamists." In sum, Rousseau "seems to have grasped, and embodied, better than anyone the incendiary appeal of victimhood in societies built around the pursuit

of wealth and power.”

Mishra finds in 19th-century Europe—in Germany and Russia in particular—two manifestations of this appeal of victimhood that continue to resound: militant cultural nationalism and an explosive nihilism manifest in anarchic terrorism. Placing German Romanticism in the context of Napoleon’s imperial march across Europe, Mishra reads figures such as Herder, Fichte, Schiller, and Kleist as ancestors of later anticolonial intellectuals who in the face of the imposition of modernization from above by a foreign power began to idealize a premodern *Volks*, “an organic national community united by a distinctive language, ways of thought, shared traditions, and a collective memory enshrined in folklore and fable.” Consequently, “Germany came to generate that strange compound we have subsequently seen in many countries: harmless nostalgia for the past glories of the ‘people’ combined with a lethal fantasy of their magnificent restoration.”

Resentment of French modernizers turned inward as Germany itself took shape as a powerful, modern, industrialized country in the late 19th century, and cultural nationalism formed the basis of a rancid politics directed at Jews and other indigenous cosmopolitans—which Wagner set to music. “Germany generated a phenomenon now visible all over Europe and America: a conservative variant of populism that posits a state of primal wholeness, or unity of the people, against transnational elites, while being itself deeply embedded in a globalized modern world.”

European and American imperialism, emulating Napoleon, brought modernity to much of the rest of the world. And resentful cultural nationalism of the German (and Italian) sort, the “inseparable twin” of such globalization of the West, followed in turn. (Influential though they were, German nationalists were outstripped by Giuseppe Mazzini in imperial precincts.) Islamism (Jamal al-Din al-Afghani), Hindu nationalism (Vinayak Damodar Savarkar), Zionism (Vladimir Ze’ev Jabotinsky), and Chinese nationalism (Liang Qichao), as Mishra demonstrates, bear unmistakable marks of a European ideological lineage. Savarkar, the chief theorist of the sort of political Hinduism (*Hindutva*) now spouted by India’s leaders, spent four years in England in the 1890s “in a daze of Mazzini worship” before launching a political career that included admiration of the anti-Semitism of Hitler’s Germany and complicity in the assassination of Mohandas Gandhi, who did not share his Hindu chauvinism. Of course, resentful cultural nationalism also had a prominent presence in the imperial metropolises of Anglo-America, and we see it once again airing its

more scabrous sentiments among many Brexit and Trump voters for whom “the mythic Volk has reappeared as a spur to solidarity and action against real and imagined enemies.”

In pursuit of an explanation of nihilism and terrorism in modernizing societies, Mishra ventures principally to Russia: to Pushkin, Herzen, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and, above all, Bakunin. Dostoevsky, reflecting on terrorists such as Sergei Nechaev in *The Demons*, Mishra explains, saw

acutely how individuals, trained to believe in a lofty notion of personal freedom and sovereignty, and then confronted with a reality that cruelly cancelled it, could break out of paralyzing ambivalence into gratuitous murder and paranoid insurgency—*podvig*, or the spectacular spiritual exploit to which characters in Dostoevsky’s fiction aspire.

Bakunin was the ideologue, if not of terror, then of a radical twist on autonomous individual self-assertion that, as Eric Voegelin said, contracted “existence into a spiritual will to destroy, without the guidance of a spiritual will to order.” By the late 19th century, a host of anarchist terrorists were perpetuating bombings and assassinations around the world (“the first phase of global jihad”). Bakunin advised them to develop a “fiercely destroying and coldly passionate fervor that freezes the mind and stops the blood in the veins of our opponents.” And he passed along his conviction that “imagining the new world was less important than abolishing the old one.”

Offering illuminating portraits of today’s terrorists from Timothy McVeigh to his prison companion Ramzi Ahmed Yousef to Mohamed Atta and others, Mishra effectively drives home the case that they, like their anarchist predecessors, are as much a product of modernity as the McDonald’s restaurants in Lahore. Often lower middle class and educated, they arrive bright-eyed from the provinces to cities in which their ambitions are thwarted. Mishra explains:

They have abandoned the most traditional sectors of their societies, and have succumbed to the fantasies of consumerism without being able to satisfy them. They respond to their own loss and disorientation with a hatred of modernity’s supposed beneficiaries; they trumpet the merits of their indigenous culture or assert its superiority, even as they have been

uprooted from this culture.

Many of them, like former pimp Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, are moved by “attraction and self-hatred before the gods of sensuousness.” They “reflect an ultimate state in the radicalization of the modern principle of individual autonomy and equality: a form of strenuous self-assertion that acknowledges no limits, and requires descent into a moral abyss.” Radical Islam is not a medieval recrudescence any more than the Rolex on the wrist of the would-be caliph of ISIS. Theirs is a “Gangsta Islam,” and its proponents’ “knowledge of Islamic tradition and theology does not exceed the pages of *Islam for Dummies*.”

As I trust I have conveyed, Mishra sweeps across three centuries and at least a dozen countries, and his intellectual history is often distressingly schematic. He jumps from thinker to thinker at a dizzying pace, sorting them out into the smug and the resentful. Lost in the mix are most of those who were neither, though Tocqueville and Nietzsche sometimes stand in for this crucial camp. But his point is made. He aims to analyze not the complexities, the contradictions, or the shifting views of the figures he calls up, but a “particular *climate* of ideas.” We do need such weathermen to see which way the wind blows, and Mishra effectively tracks the storms of *ressentiment* that have raged across the globe, traces their lineage and movement, and lays out their predictable consequences. Above all, perhaps, he effectively drives home his contention that the terrible violence that wracks our time, indelibly etched in the minds of Americans by the falling towers of the World Trade Center, marks not a “clash of civilizations,” as the self-righteous among us would argue, but long-standing strife within a single civilization. Our own.

Where do Mishra’s own sympathies lie? He can at times sound very much like those whose resentment he chronicles. “*Homo economicus*, the autonomous, reasoning, rights-bearing individual, that quintessential product of industrialism and modern political philosophy,” he says, “has actually realized his fantastical plans to bring all of human existence into the mesh of production and consumption.” Ours, he finds, is a “world of soul-killing mediocrity, cowardice, opportunism, and immoral deal-making.”

Statements such as this, he knows, are bound to stir the ire of those peddling “a triumphalist history of Anglo-American achievements that has long shaped the speeches of statesmen, think-tank reports, technocratic surveys, newspaper editorials, while supplying fuel to countless columnists, TV pundits, and so-called

terrorism experts.” And sure enough, we find Michael Ignatieff, a prominent Humvee liberal who backed the civilizing mission of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, huffing in the pages of the *New York Review of Books* that Mishra ignores “all the positive impulses” of modernity. Ignatieff allows that Mishra does not justify terrorism, but he says that “in seeing its perpetrators as holy warriors against ‘modernity’ he justifies their arguments.”

Terrorism does not mark a “clash of civilizations” but a strife within our own.

This is nonsense. Ignatieff confuses explanation and exculpation. Mishra is equally hard on modernity and its resentful critics. He is profoundly ambivalent, and he has been ever since as a young man he discovered the work of Edmund Wilson in the library of his university in Benares, felt the pull of a life “wholly devoted to reading and thinking and writing,” and set about a brilliant career of wrestling inconclusively with the “temptations of the West.” At the moment, Mishra has unhappily arrived—and about this Ignatieff seems to me correct—at a stance of “passionate fatalism and angry resignation.” In the conclusion to an earlier book (*From the Ruins of Empire*), Mishra laments that the revolt of Asia against its imperial masters has for all its impressive accomplishments been “an immense intellectual failure.” For “no convincingly universalist response exists today to Western ideas of politics and economy, even though these seem increasingly febrile and dangerously unsuitable in large parts of the world.”

This stance troubles me because I have learned so much from Mishra’s books and yet cannot (quite) share his despair. So let me conclude with a defense of modernity that I don’t think is smug. One should not blinker the price that many have paid for modernity, especially those upon whom it has been imposed. But Mishra’s portrait of modern society is a caricature, like something drawn up by a University of Chicago economist or Paul Ryan’s chief of staff. Unbridled capitalism has never swallowed modernity whole, and, though one would not know it from his book, it has long found itself not only at odds with resentment from antimodernists but also opposed from within by modernists who have quickly awakened to the shortcomings, tensions, and contradictions within modernity itself.

To take but one example, consider the emptiness of formal equality. As Mishra says, “the most commonplace and potent accusation the spokesmen of the disgruntled levelled against their rulers was hypocrisy: this much-advertised promise of happiness through material comforts was deceitful since only a minority can achieve

it, at great expense to the majority.”

But this accusation has long been leveled from within the camp of modernity’s proponents, not only socialists (about whom Mishra says very little) but liberals determined to regulate markets in the interest of democracy and meaningful liberty (about whom Mishra says nothing). Freedom, John Dewey argued, must be “effective freedom,” that is, it must be armed with substantive equality in the resources necessary to exercise it. Societies with markets need not be market societies, as Karl Polanyi taught us—a message shared by Dewey, John Rawls, Thomas Piketty, and many others in Europe and America who would add social rights to the roster of modern liberalism. Danish modernity is not American modernity, nor is American modernity destined to persist in its current, admittedly troubling, form.

Nor should Muslim and Hindu moderns be burdened with a “universalist response” to Western modernity any more than they should have to endure those whom Reinhold Niebuhr termed the “bland fanatics of Western civilization who regard the highly contingent achievements of our culture as the final form and norm of human existence.” There is capacious space within the evolving norms of a shared modernity for experimentation and pluralism. The results may be bizarre—witness the fairy-tale mosques that President Recep Erdogan has built in Istanbul and Ankara cheek by jowl with forbidding apartment blocks (and, in one case, on top of a Volkswagen dealership).

On the other hand, Mishra notes that years before Mohamed Atta led the attack on the Twin Towers he wrote a master’s thesis in urban planning criticizing the highways and high rises that followed the modernization of Aleppo. Atta argued for a return to traditional neighborhood forms with courtyard homes and market stalls, seeing this as a route to an alternative modernity rooted in Islamic culture, a sort of Muslim “new urbanism.” Now that Aleppo is more or less a blank slate, courtesy of the especially brutal Syrian experience of modernity and its resentments, perhaps someone will pick up on Atta’s thought and give it a go—once the rubble has been cleared away and the bodies buried.

In sum, there are seldom unalloyed goods. Every document of modern civilization may, as Walter Benjamin believed, be at the same time a document of barbarism. In that case, modern men and women of a properly tragic disposition in the face of this entanglement can and should at least hope and struggle to change the proportions.

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