A Conversation with Pankaj Mishra

“THE END OF THE WESTERN MODEL”

moderated by IPC Senior Scholar Evren Balta

Evren Balta: Let me start by asking what made the Western model so attractive, and why is it crumbling today?

Pankaj Mishra: The model is currently deeply inadequate, since back then no one thought about if the model was politically or environmentally sustainable in the long run. The answer is that it is neither. What we are seeing now is that countries such as the United States and Britain are struggling with the pandemic, for instance, but countries such as China, South Korea, and Vietnam have done much better than the rich countries. What exactly is this achievement of the West, and why has it become so helpless suddenly today? What made the Western model so attractive is the success of imperialism, the invasion, occupation, and colonization of large parts of the world. Even countries that were not occupied believed that sovereignty was radically impaired, like China and Japan. It became clear to them that in order to survive, they had to duplicate the Western model within their own countries. Japan did it, and so did Turkey. What has happened in the past few years is that people have realized that the Western model is unattainable. This is huge progress, since it has affected much of intellectual and emotional life, so much of our political processes and economic processes have been shaped by that hope that we will get there one day. But now we have realized that there is nothing there to reach out to achieve.

Evren Balta: Two immediate questions came to my mind. The first one is about the role of intellectuals and ideas. The critics of the 19th century, such as Marx, saw the Western model as destructive and discussed it in the context of capitalism. If you look at the critics of the model today, the debate is mostly normative and civilizational. The most radical criticism is coming from extremist militant groups. Do you think this lack of substantial criticism coming from inside is one of the reasons for the current crisis of the Western model?

Pankaj Mishra: I think it is an important question, because we find ourselves intellectually helpless in many ways. The critics of the Western model of expansion, acquisition, appropriation, capitalism, and imperialism are looking at it and thinking that it is not politically and environmentally sustainable. Gandhi, for instance, also noticed that this model was not going to work. Japan, as an example, had a calamitous experiment in imperialism, which came to an end with the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In the late 19th century, people had a broad realization that this model is deeply problematic as it is built on violence and dispossession.

The other place where such criticism can emerge is from the intellectual class and the educated class to which you and I belong. Now, one reason why it does not emerge in quite the same way is that the cultural and intellectual hegemony of the West is much greater than it was in the late
19th century. What is more, Western ideologies and ideologies of capitalism have become hegemonic. Intellectuals in India, Indonesia, and also Turkey all talk about the same thing in similar ways. This is because they are part of a network. The problem around the world is quite extraordinary. If an intellectual wants to make a living, you must become a mouthpiece for existing ideologies. I think that the possibility of dissent in the intellectual world has been foreclosed.

Another reason why thinking about such problems has not happened until the current crisis is that we kept on molding these ideas that we picked up from a Brookings Institution report, the Economist, or the Financial Times. We never examined just how practical it is and whether it is even applicable to our respective situations. For instance, what does urbanization mean in the context of India? Is it even sustainable? The answer is obviously “no,” but we keep talking about it. We cannot stop because there is no incentive to challenge that. In that sense, intellectual life has become an industry that does not interrogate existing paradigms. This is something that we need to change.

Evren Balta: This reminds me of your criticism of modernizing elites in the beginning of the 20th century, who blindly copied certain ideas that were bound to fail. I want to shift the conversation to the models that became successful in the non-Western world. What if the failure is not coming from the Western model itself but rather from how we adapt it, issues of corruption, and a lack of strong institutional base for these societies? Could that be a reason for the crisis we are going through? More recently, with reference to the COVID crisis, you argue that the problem was not being able to create strong state institutions and an educated citizenry. In many cases, this was not because of the lack of capacity but an intentional choice of the elites. Therefore, maybe the collapse of the Western model was not just about blindly copying certain ideas, but it was also about ignoring the essential ones. Do you agree?

Pankaj Mishra: First of all, there is no historical evidence that supports the idea that the Western model is universally applicable. When the West modernized, built up its industries and its administrative power, it was not at all democratic. Most people such as women did not have the right to vote. England and the United States were not democracies when they embarked upon the project of nation-building and industrialization. That is what made them so powerful. Once you move away from a certain kind of moralizing language that the Western model uses, then you will see a different reality—a reality of violent and bloody processes of state and institution building. Second, the Western model basically universalized through imperialism and colonialism, through destroying local capacities, local knowledge. There was no capacity to build all these institutions to begin with. They had to accept the normative parts of the Western model—parts that the West ignored when building its own model.

Currently, we see that some other states are building large state capacities. China has emerged from the pandemic and already restarted its economy due to its state capacity. In many ways, these states saw the whole Western model—liberalism, individualism, democracy—as hollow at different levels. If you embark on the adventure of modernity, then what South Korea and China did, even though violent and bloody, brought success. They built powerful states with strong state capacity. They created a system of social welfare, public health structures, and proper educational systems. They did not necessarily copy the normative parts of the model. This is where I think we need to examine all these ideas and assumptions that we have inherited. The problem is that the West itself did not live up
to those ideas in the past. Why should the burden fall upon the countries that are currently trying to achieve the Western model?

Evren Balta: Branko Milanović recently argued that we are now alone with capitalism, and competition is between the two variants of capitalism: the liberal Western variant, which is collapsing, and the political capitalism of China, which is rising. Are we in between these two alternatives? What would happen if all the normative claims of capitalism are gone? Will we end up with Chinese model, which offers no substantial protection from state power? Isn’t the Western model, or its normative claims, a result of centuries of fighting as well—such as protection from arbitrary authority?

Pankaj Mishra: That is a tragedy of modern history that we must recognize—which is that the so-called self-evident truths have only been realized for a minority. To make them available for the majority, we must rethink our whole political and economic systems. Unless we recognize this, I do not know how we can move forward. You will either end up with the capitalism of the Western style, which offers protection only to a minority and claims falsely that protection is universal, or you end up with the Chinese model, which offers no protection. Neither the Western model nor the Chinese model is appealing and attractive. It is generally an impasse, but it is not an unprecedented one.

Evren Balta: There is a growing demand among middle-class citizens of non-Western societies to acquire citizenship in the West. What they are seeking is not better material conditions. In fact, if they move to the West, their material conditions will probably get worse. What they seek is rule of law and stability, and the West still fares better in that regard. What do these individual aspirations tell us about the Western model?

Pankaj Mishra: It is easy to generalize from these experiences. People from Myanmar, for instance, escape to India although the country is certainly not flourishing right now. For them, it is preferable to what they have back in Myanmar. You must consider the fact that their lives could be intolerable due to being part of the wrong ethnic minority, which leads to fear of death and inferior material circumstances. It is natural for them to seek another country where they will feel safer. Europe was hell for most of the early 20th century, but after that it created a better society in which law is generally respected. Of course, it will be attractive to many people who feel the absence of it elsewhere. But, I am not sure if that proves that the Western model is sustainable or what the Western model can achieve.

Evren Balta: In your book Age of Anger, you argue that emotions play a huge role in contemporary politics. Was it always like that, or is it a new phenomenon? What role do emotions play in today’s world?

Pankaj Mishra: Emotions play a bigger role for individuals today, because they are more exposed to the outside world than before. The less you know about the world around you, the more control you have over it. This is the world that you can somehow manage and deal with. Now, social relations have become abstract, and that has happened dramatically over the last few decades. You suddenly find yourself alone in this new area. You have no buffers, as well, due to the way we process and receive information today. This results in much greater pressure on our minds and souls, and much more emotional intensity at the same time. This is a very unexplored subject that is not featured in our general discourse. Sometimes it feels like there is just too much stimulus out there. Not to mention that there is a possibility that you are being triggered by something or someone millions of miles away as in the case of the United States and Twitter.
Evren Balta: We are talking about the desire for control in our lives. It has increased tremendously, because we have more information about what our options are. At the same time, our capacity to control what is around us has diminished tremendously, too. Perhaps we can say that emotions fill in the gap between the desire to control and the capacity to control.

Pankaj Mishra: Absolutely!

Evren Balta: That gap, you argue in your latest book, is filled by populists and authoritarian leaders. These leaders are creating a new emotional bond with their supporters in new ways. Are these leaders transferring individual frustration with the world to something bigger now? If you look at the foreign policies of India, the United States, or Turkey, you see these leaders keep referring to the lost opportunities and their aspiration to make the nation great again. Is it possible to say that this is what creates the emotional bond with these leaders? Is this something that gives the feeling of control to the masses in such an uncertain time, as well as hope?

Pankaj Mishra: I would even say that is true for Britain as well. “Take back control” was the most successful slogan of the Brexit campaign. Nobody knew what it meant, but it was emotionally attractive. Here comes a demagogue offering them that sought-after control, and they fell for it. You can see that phenomena in different ways in India and Turkey, where things seem opaque to so many people that they find it difficult to understand what is going on in the wider world. The psycho-political processes lead social bonds to deteriorate, emotional confusion arises, and then along comes a simplifier. People come and offer you a new community, sources of emotional satisfaction, and sources of meaning. You find that there is a very large population of people who are ready to follow you. That underpins the successes of many of these demagogues today.

Evren Balta: In your book, you mention that loss of control is usually expressed as anger. You end up with the masses who are angry about everything that comes in their way. In one of your interviews, you also argue that what we are experiencing is a crisis of masculinity. What I want to ask is whether the rise of anger as a political force is also a symptom and an outcome of the crisis of masculinity.

Pankaj Mishra: Certainly. This crisis of masculinity is one of the reasons why people like Erdoğan and Putin exist. When you look at these public personas and the investment they make in presenting themselves, you understand their reputation as a strong man. More at a societal level, one of the major crises today is the crisis of the young male, not of the middle-aged man or older man. It is young men who seek that kind of power that is promised to them by the modern world. There are masculine models of achievement such as finding a stable job or having sporting excellence, but they are all elusive. They are all gone, and a lot of anger and disaffection results from that. The most achievable model is building a better body, but everything else seems too difficult to achieve. That is one reason why places like India have experienced an explosion in bodybuilding. Everything else is more difficult to achieve. Often this anger is directed against physically and hierarchically weaker people or people below you, because this is also about the desire to show the world that you are powerful. There is then something indistinguishable between achieving power and the will to dominate. The right response would be to withdraw from power claims and examine our ideas about power. Is this a power that can be achieved benignly with outcomes that are good for other people, as well?
Evren Balta: The radical challenges to Western modernity are coming from organizations like ISIS, which exhibits an extreme form of hyper-masculinity. Might this be seen as another piece of evidence that the current crisis is a crisis of masculinity?

Pankaj Mishra: Yes, and at the same time we have movements reflecting that type of masculinity, ranging from the Jordan Peterson type to far-right militias such as Trump. In this search for power, you become unassailable. But the nature of power is that the moment you feel closer to it, it slips away, and you start chasing it more and more. At the same time, you become vulnerable to fantasies like Donald Trump and Erdoğan, who are preying on your insecurities and deep emotional inadequacies. They offer themselves as surrogate fathers and models of the strong man in front of the nation, which is what many men want to be.

Evren Balta: What do you think of movements like Black Lives Matter, which are coming from inside the West? Coupled with the collapse of Western societies in the context of COVID, these major protests against institutionalized racism and other types of inequalities may offer a self-reflexive moment. Could this be the moment where Western societies drop their fantasies and realize themselves for what they are? On that note, do you think these movements are transformative?

Pankaj Mishra: There is this danger that people might want to go back to the way things were before, and that temptation would be strong if Joe Biden wins. We have made progress in the past few years, not because of intellectuals, webinars, or seminars but because young people have entered politics and have come up with new ideas. An example of this is Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. When it comes to organizing our society with new ideas, that happens through political struggles. Intellectuals need to be brought back into the dialogue with society. They also need to break away from big business corporations and test their ideas against reality, especially in the case of the United States. They also need to make sure that their ideas are not promoted as universally applicable to all national and regional contexts.

Evren Balta: When we look at the global distribution of wealth, what we see is that global wealth is more equally distributed among nations now—or at least it is less dominated by the West. What we also see is that inequality has increased within Western societies. The middle class in the non-Western world is broadening, while it is shrinking in the West. These groups now ask for more recognition, more status. The leaders of their states are also asking for more recognition, more power. In a way, what we are experiencing right now is a system that is generating more equality outside of the West. On a hopeful note, can we argue that this challenged the hierarchies of the past two centuries and created new voices? Even though this equalizing dynamic comes with a lot of instability now, can it be transformed into a more positive force in the future?

Pankaj Mishra: Several things are happening here. The Western model is built upon successes and achievements that came at a time when the West had no rivals. Then, because of the United States, the liberal international order was created. Now China is challenging the West with its large population, its resources, and its training. Going back to your question, I think you will find that most of the changes that have happened in the non-Western world have happened because of China. But, is it sustainable if China continues to rise like this? Nobody knows, and it would be foolish of me to say anything at this point. Is the process of
middle-class consolidation in places like Turkey or India going to continue? I do not think anybody knows. What we are looking at right now is a partial result of the investments and new policies adopted in the last few decades. Yes, you have a sizeable middle class, but when you start looking at economic fundamentals, I do not see a strong basis for sustained growth of middle class over the next few decades. Yet, until it all plays out, no one would know what is going to happen. Yes, some things can be easily identified, as you just mentioned, the kind of relative equalization has helped. But, I think the larger gains have gone to a minority in the West.

Questions from the audience

Q: Has the structural transformation of capitalism contributed to the end of the Western model?

Pankaj Mishra: This is true in that capitalism broke free of the kind of national boundaries it was bound to. Once it became global after the 1990s, the idea that democracy and capitalism go hand in hand fell apart. All of a sudden, you start hearing of tax havens. The relationship between democracy and capitalism broke, and then it became difficult to sustain and to hold it up as a model for the rest of the world.

Q: How can one go beyond or even without these discursive circuits of the knowledge industry as you describe? Is it a desire to be part of it, or aren’t we in a relationship of interdependency? Is a self-critical stance then enough to overcome that interdependency, or is an institutional breakdown necessary?

Pankaj Mishra: I have no ideas about how to solve the problem, but I think it is a problem and it should be recognized widely as such. Yes, our intellectual discourses are homogenized to the point where they are extremely sterile. This is especially apparent in mainstream publications, periodicals, or think tanks. How does one change that? Setting up alternative institutions might replicate the same problem as it would be creating special spaces for dissent and also might condemn them to marginality. In that regard, we need to respect the role of the unaffiliated, free thinker. I often argue that people from countries that are colonized by the West offer some of the most interesting critiques of the so-called Western model. Why do we not pay so much attention to them? That is because there is more infrastructure supporting other voices rather than theirs. There are prejudices preventing us from seeking out alternative sources of ideas, knowledge, and wisdom. We need to reach out to the people working on the ground, whether from environmental groups or people fighting mining corporations in India.

Q: Your introduction to the Time Regulation Institute, also in The Guardian, has been criticized for misplacing facts and misrepresenting the author/novel, e.g., the shift to Western time started with the Ottomans, although Tanpinar (in Yaşadığım Gibi) is known to express his appreciation for some Kemalist policies. What was your reading of Tanpinar based on? The English translations of his novels, including A Mind at Peace, other Turkish novelists such as Pamuk, or the Western model as a descriptive tool?

Q: In an attempt to reveal your fascination with Ahmet Hamdi Tanpinar, I would like to ask what, in your opinion, are the damages caused by top-down modernization? What are the political impacts of coming to grips with such damages?
Pankaj Mishra: I lack knowledge of Turkish, and I am delighted to be corrected on the mistakes I have made. I think he is not the only writer that talks about the subject of modernization and what happens as a result of that. Those things also happened elsewhere in Asia, but Turkey came relatively early to that process. Yet, let us not forget it also happened first in Japan, and the first generation of modern Japanese writers did the same. This deliberate destruction of the past is a recurring theme in many works of fiction in Japan and later in places like India, too.

Q: The recent Freedom House report shows that the pandemic threatens the state of democracy and human rights. The report warns that these authoritarian moves of governments will stay even if we recover from the COVID-19 crisis, and people living in those countries will suffer longer. What do you think about enhanced tech surveillance and putting much more control in the hands of the national governments?

Pankaj Mishra: That is always a danger. In fact, in March when I realized that the pandemic is serious, I wrote a piece about how the state is going to become hugely important again. This can be beneficial, of course, since the state is the only agency able to coordinate an effective response to the pandemic. The market cannot do that. At the same time, however, reinvesting trust in the state's capacity might backfire, because the state is run by autocrats who are interested in acquiring more power. The other problem is that once the state acquires that power, it is difficult to then take back that power from the state. This definitely will be one of the main struggles going forward during this time of crisis.