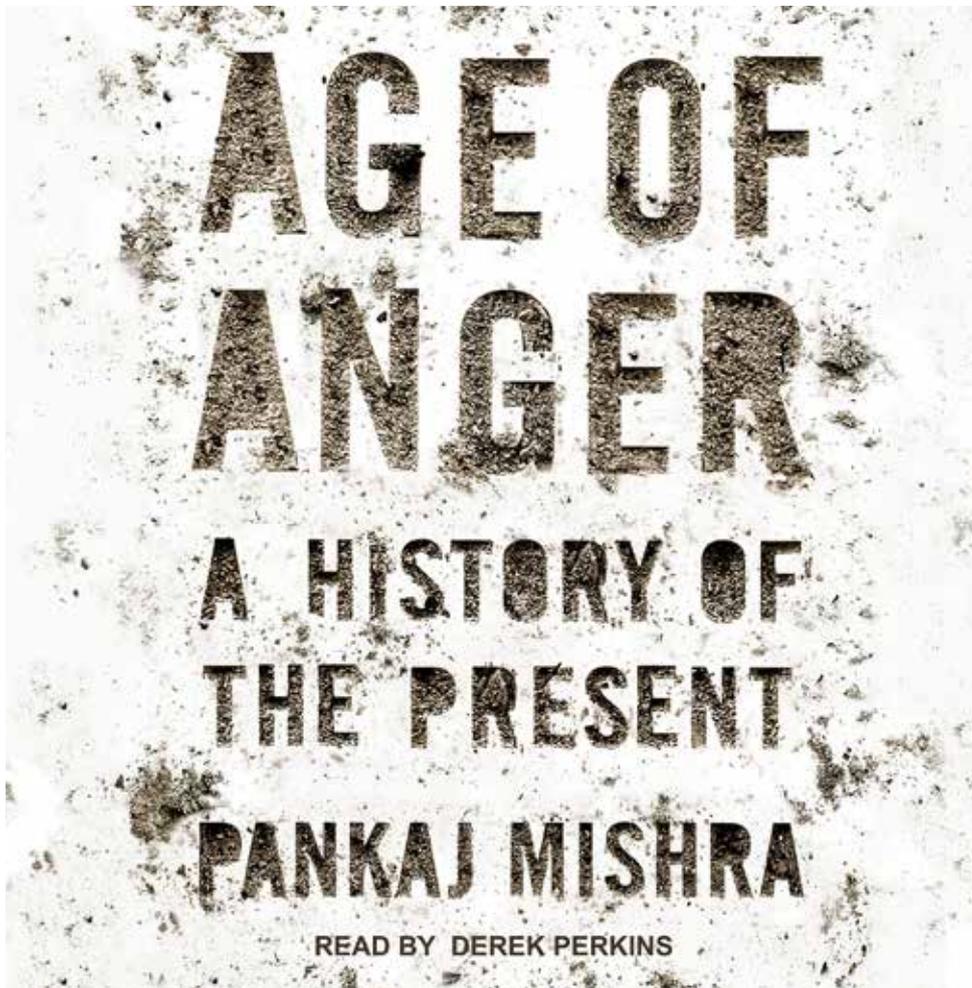


LOOKING AGAIN AT THE AGE OF ANGER

Pankaj Mishra



About the Istanbul Policy Center-Sabancı University-Stiftung Mercator Initiative

The Istanbul Policy Center–Sabancı University–Stiftung Mercator Initiative aims to strengthen the academic, political, and social ties between Turkey and Germany as well as Turkey and Europe. The Initiative is based on the premise that the acquisition of knowledge and the exchange of people and ideas are preconditions for meeting the challenges of an increasingly globalized world in the 21st century. The Initiative focuses on two areas of cooperation, EU/German-Turkish relations and climate change, which are of essential importance for the future of Turkey and Germany within a larger European and global context.

My book *Age of Anger* was widely reviewed upon its publication in January 2017. Most of the reviews in the mainstream media, however, were more usefully read as defiant assertions of the West's endangered ideological orthodoxy. The anchor of the BBC's prime-time current affairs show was openly incredulous that I would question the universal progress signaled so clearly by the lifting of hundreds of millions of Indians and Chinese out of poverty. *The New York Times'* reviewer accused me of issuing "angry bromides" about the "Western model," adding, "let's say a few kind words for neoliberalism." The critic at the *Economist* wondered why I was complaining about the West since I "sup at the tables of the Western intelligentsia." An acolyte of Isaiah Berlin, who reviewed my book in the *New York Review of Books*, was scandalized by my alleged sympathy for Daesh. A luminary of the Murdoch-owned London *Times* accused me of favoring headhunters in Borneo over Western civilization.

Only a couple of reviews noticed the book's provenance in an experience of India. I started to write *Age of Anger* not long after May 2014, when a Hindu supremacist accused of presiding over the mass murder of Muslims became India's most powerful prime minister in decades. Hindu supremacism under Narendra Modi had surged on the back of failed promises. The country's first postcolonial elite had scantily delivered on the country's founding promise of democracy and development, and a more recent guarantee, underwritten by the country's neoliberal ruling class, of general prosperity through stout fidelity to the principles of the market, had flopped more spectacularly. In fact, recent years in India had witnessed the proliferation of a social jungle, marked by exploitation and inequality, in which a state stigmatized by corruption scandals and weakened by global crises increasingly appeared to lack authority and legitimacy. Not for the first time had a failed experiment in economic liberalism, which benefitted the few at great expense to the many, created a reservoir of frustration and resentment, and an opening for fascistic and semi-fascistic movements and demagogues.

Modi, backed by India's richest people and even some self-proclaimed "liberal" intellectuals, was attempting to rebuild a weakened state and nation-

alist ideology through a refurbished program of cultural nationalism, with some new values, ideals, historical myths, and symbols. In this venture, Modi and his toadies have succeeded beyond measure—almost as well as the Italian fascists who took over Italy's failed modernization and nation-building projects from liberal democrats. They have not only made the state reassert its sovereignty through violence and ruthless discriminations; they have also made society an exuberant participant in this sovereign power by granting the power of life and death to lynch mobs and by encouraging hate-filled trolls on social media to go after "traitorous" minorities and liberal elites.

This state-directed vitalist barbarism is a formidable new power in a country full of angry and frustrated young men; and, boosted by Silicon Valley's innovations, it has already blown away all old political and ethical criteria. But Modi, shockingly extreme to many members of the Indian elite, induced déjà vu in me. This was not only because of Hindu supremacism's openly avowed and easily recognizable pedigree in Europe's far-right movements. For someone with my social background—dispossessed Brahmin gentry with natural affinities to reactionary politics—Modi was someone profoundly and unnervingly intimate. Adolf Hitler features in Thomas Mann's incandescent 1939 essay "That Man is My Brother" as a semblable, "a man possessed of a bottomless resentment and a desire for revenge," who "rouses the populace with images of his own insulted grandeur, deafens with promises, makes out of the people's sufferings a vehicle for his own greatness," but who is nevertheless "a brother—a rather unpleasant and mortifying brother." Modi sparked this same appalled self-recognition in me.

The question of what resentment is was never abstract or remote for me. As a child I had imbibed the prejudices of semi-rural upper-caste Hindus who believed themselves to be under threat from all quarters: from an ostensibly secular and supercilious English-speaking elite as well as politically assertive low-caste Hindus. At college in a declining provincial city, I encountered people whose sense of an inimical world and feelings of personal inadequacy were much greater and politically more volatile than my own.

With this formative experience of minds and bod-

ies consumed by resentment, I was drawn to exploring the “climate of ideas, a structure of feeling, and cognitive disposition” rather than (re) writing a history of ideas or cataloguing their content. Perry Anderson acutely remarked of Ernest Gellner’s theory of nationalism that “whereas [Max] Weber was so bewitched by the spell of nationalism that he was never able to theorize it, Gellner has theorized nationalism without detecting the spell.” Writing after Modi’s enthronement, a moment of great personal trauma (suffered again with his recent reelection), I became obsessed with understanding the seemingly ever-renewable spell of nationalism or ethnic-religious chauvinism, on writers and intellectuals as much as the masses. I was interested specifically in some contagious states of minds and mentalities. Hence, the centrality of Rousseau to *Age of Anger* as a figure whose revulsion against the mores of metropolitan Paris finds a global resonance, from the German-speaking peoples to the ideologues of the Iran’s Islamic Revolution.

I had been taking notes in the years before 2014 for a book on the shared experience of belatedness: starting with Germany, and then Russia and Italy, before radiating out to Japan and the postcolonial world. I hoped to examine the intellectual affinities (and political pathologies) that bound people in these countries as they entered the (very deeply rigged) race for wealth and power (and how a remarkable number of them became the most acute diagnosticians of modern maladies). *Age of Anger*, though written in response to an emergency, is largely a product of this endeavor to write an emotional history of uneven development: how the appearance of relentless forward movement provokes anxieties about being left behind rival nations or ideologies, races or religions.

It seemed to me that the early political, economic, and technological revolutions had privileged certain countries—Britain, France, and the United States—in the race for wealth and power, forcing the rest into a reaction that was ambivalent at best and treacherously confused at worst: loathing of the new imperial hierarchy of nations and peoples, and resentment of economic and cultural superiority, but also an envious desire to steal the secret of their superiors’ success and supplant them. In country after country, from nineteenth-century

Prussia to postcolonial Indonesia, this enlisting into the march of history took the form of an ideological mobilization—the construction of a nationality or “people,” the centralization of the state’s powers, rapid-fire industrialization and militarization, and often many radical and calamitous shortcuts, such as China’s Great Leap Forward, all in an effort not to be left behind.

Of course, this large-scale national mobilization and ferocious international competition was not what a universalizing ideology of progress first articulated during the late eighteenth century had envisaged. While not excluding the possibility of conflict, it posited a far more benign outcome to the global diffusion of individual reason and competitive commerce. So did the prophets of neoliberal globalization in our own time as they reconfigured society into a marketplace, encouraging human beings to think of themselves as entrepreneurs.

Indeed, a naïve vision of enlightened universalism became hegemonic again during the age of capitalist exuberance that began in 1989 and ended in 2007. During this intellectually and artistically regressive fin de siècle, many Steven Pinkers came to flourish at all levels of the government, the media, and the knowledge industry in general. Busy prescribing how the “Muslim world” or other backward societies should progress, hardly any of them reckoned with the possibility of a political and economic breakdown in the heart of the fully modern West.

It became clearer as I was writing *Age of Anger* that the remorseless logic of uneven capitalist development had not only shaped the trajectory of a majority of the world’s population—the so-called latecomers to modernity—but also generated such “catch-up” and apparently “aberrant” ideologies as Nazism, Italian Fascism, and Japanese militarism. With China turning the economic tables, it was also starting to have devastating political consequences, as the phenomena of Brexit and Trump and Le Pen underlined, for the apparent winners of modern history. Many among them had made the nasty discovery that liberal democracy and capitalism, their evidently “normal” and superior political and economic structures, had cruelly betrayed

their promise of freedom and prosperity.

Age of Anger has been criticized for amalgamating too many different types of anger. This might seem a serious flaw, given the objective differences in “global position and power” between a Modi-voting Hindu and a Trump-voting American. But I was much less interested in drawing up a taxonomy of political disaffection and anger than in narrating the subjective experience of uneven development under conditions of intense global competition and rivalry, where political and material interests are tightly pressed together, each appearing to constrain the other.

Thus, the far-right in Europe is haunted by the specter of colonization by the immigrants from Europe’s own former colonies. At the same time, the latter fear being treated like Europe’s Jews, who had once dreaded suffering the fate of indigenous peoples and Blacks in America. One could add to this list the upper-caste Hindus who are driven to vote for Modi out of fear of relegation into the ranks of the low-caste Hindus and poor Muslims. *Age of Anger* details several instances of these mimetic fears shared among apparent enemies across categories of class, race, religion, and nationality.

These fears seem independent of all considerations of political rationality and are easily instrumentalized by demagogues. Such an insidious cunning of unreason raises the question: what is to be done?

Lurching out of a short-lived episode of faux-Enlightenment, or the age of Pinkerism, where progress seemed guaranteed and ruling classes everywhere had only kind words to say about neoliberalism, we actually find ourselves even further away from the possibility of human emancipation. Socialists as well as Pinker-ists may have consistently exaggerated the human goods that can be realized in the world as it is. But if we take Enlightenment to be “man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity,” then this “task,” and “obligation” as Kant defined it, is never fulfilled; it has to be continually renewed by every generation in ever-changing social and political conditions.

For many young people in the United States aghast at the immaturity, myopia, or pig-headedness of the boomer generation, socialism constitutes a

new horizon of hope. It is true that the set of ideas that emerged in response to a widespread distress of the working classes preserved the ethical core of Christianity against the Social Darwinist ethos of industrial capitalism. Any weakening of its principles of compassion and solidarity were bound to lead to large-scale suffering, as can be witnessed in our own age, when capitalism, somewhat defanged after 1945 by social-welfarism in the West and protectionist economies elsewhere, again turned feral, devastating the environment as well as workers’ rights.

Of course, socialism, as articulated in the United States, is primarily a plea for some human decency, even though the gendarmes of the ancien regime in the “legacy” periodicals make it seem like the harbinger of mass purges and executions. It can only be welcomed by outsiders like myself who have long despaired at Americans’ seeming acquiescence to their state of capitalist savagery. I wrote shortly after the 2015 attacks on Charlie Hebdo that “we may have to retrieve the Enlightenment, as much as religion, from its fundamentalists, and the task for those who cherish freedom is to reimagine it – through an ethos of criticism combined with compassion and ceaseless self-awareness – in our own irreversibly mixed and highly unequal societies and the larger interdependent world.” In this sense, who can fail to acknowledge the urgency of the Green New Deal? The only suitable modern ideology for a steadily uninhabitable earth is green socialism.

Still, for those of us from countries that lived with a version of modern developmentalism, the current appeal of socialism reminds us, inevitably and soberingly, not only of the scale of its historical defeat, but also its inadequacies—its hubristic faith in human mastery over nature and its simple-minded view of individual desires and motivations. (A book like Martin Hägglund’s *This Life* is welcome precisely for its attempt to draw an image of human fulfillment that can stand as a persuasive indictment of our societies and offer a moral and spiritual foundation for socialist practice today). I am also inclined to wonder whether the left’s search for class solidarity, whether nationally or transnationally, tragically marks its permanent disappearance. In India, for instance, the experience of blocked

social mobility, poor private and state education, have created conditions not for class struggle but a mass exodus into the smartphone's screen, where Modi joins Bollywood stars and social media influencers in offering endless possibilities of consumption and virtual self-aggrandizement.

Too many conventional premises of political action have been eroded by the advance of markets and technology into the most intimate spheres of our lives. Even the most sensitive and intelligent people seem to have become perilously inured to living in a cacophonous society/marketplace—one that forces people into bitterly fierce competition with each other and leaves them stewed in envy, resentment, and fear, existentially and spiritually at each other's throats. The permanent state of warfare on Twitter in that sense reflects a broader sociopathy.

My own book ends with a compressed and somewhat discouraging anthropology of the digital, and calling for some "truly transformative thinking, about both the self and the world." This might seem a utopian flourish, putting too much faith in our willingness and capacity for reeducation. But can it be doubted that many of our self-perceptions, habits, and assumptions will have to be radically altered if our world is to remain inhabitable for future generations? It is true that the task at hand is the defeat and marginalization of the far right. But it is worth remembering that the moral and intellectual choices facing us are far wider than those presupposed by the need for political victory.

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