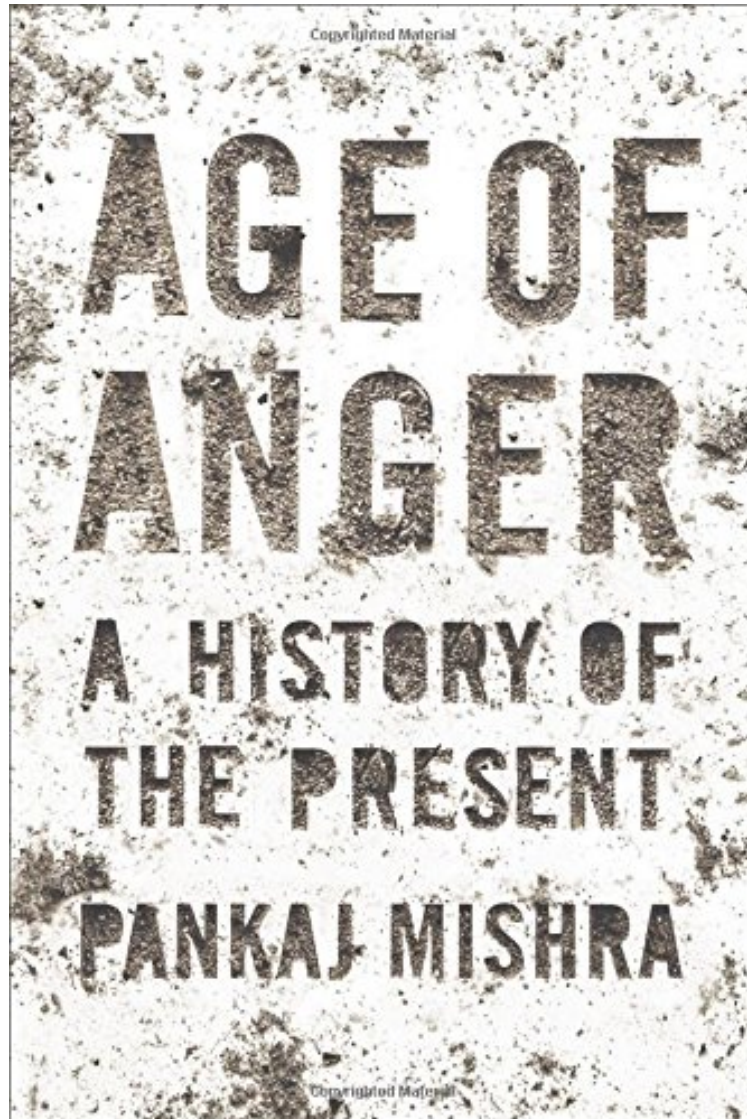


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## Age of Anger: A History of the Present

*Pankaj Mishra*

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#40566 in Books Mishra Pankaj 2017-02-07 2017-02-07 Original language: English PDF # 1 .34 x 1.36 x 5.86l, .0 #File Name: 0374274789416 pages Age of Anger A History of the Present | File size: 58.Mb

**Pankaj Mishra : Age of Anger: A History of the Present** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Age of Anger: A History of the Present:

38 of 41 people found the following review helpful. Opaque and Non-Linear, But Still Interesting and Worthwhile By Charles Twenty years ago, that liberal Baal, philosopher Martha Nussbaum, assigned me to read *The Golden Bowl*, by Henry James. She said it was the best book she had ever read. Maybe it was, but it was unreadable, and I am just as smart as Nussbaum. The problem with *The Golden Bowl* is that you know Henry James is very bright, yet you have to struggle so much to get at the meaning that you wonder if there is any meaning there or is it all just a parlor trick to

gratify the authors vanity and flatter the reader who claims to understand? But, certainly, the weight of learned opinion favors Henry James as a genius and me as an imbecile. A similar freighted opacity characterizes Pankaj Mishra's *Age of Anger*. As far as I'm concerned, the jury is still out on whos the imbecile. Mishra is a man with a foot in two worlds. He is a comfortable denizen of the upper crust liberal world of London and New York; of *The Guardian* and *The New York Review of Books*; a man in globalized full. But he is also a (less comfortable) denizen of rural India, the place and land of his birth, and one around which much of his writing revolves. He makes his living navigating the connections between and interstices among his two worlds, offering what appear to be (and may well actually be) fresh insights to the global elite, from a perspective new to them, although one often wonders if his role is to introduce just enough discomfort to create a frisson of transgression, quickly followed by the healing absolution of liberal platitudes. The basic purpose (I hesitate to call it a thesis, since it is nothing so clear) of this beautifully written book is to trace the origins of modern nihilistic violence among non-Western cultures backwards to 19th Century Western antecedents and thinking. Its secondary purpose is to then to conflate that violence and its practitioners with a variety of Western and Eastern mainstream politicians, and their supporters, whom Mishra dislikes, from Trump to Modi. ISIS, being the problem child of the hour, is the primary exemplar Mishra uses to discuss today's nihilistic violence. Mishra tries to show that ISIS is not really Islamic, and is merely part of a continuum of modern violence, not an example of Huntington's supposedly mythical clash of civilizations. Rather, since as Mishra shows, past (i.e., Western) modernization was characterized by carnage and bedlam, so we can expect much more of the same globally, and not limited to ISIS, as the rest of the world modernizes, and we are in fact seeing it. Mishra is not a stock liberal, most especially not a stock neoliberal, and he has actually done a lot of thinking. Ultimately, he seems to conclude that ISIS and other practitioners of violence are the final result of extreme autonomic individualism, the logical end point of liberal democracy. Thus, if the modern project of liberal democracy means increasing individual freedom, the end product, in some cases, is not a satisfied man and the optimum society of Francis Fukuyama, but a man with a bomb and a dream, not a pleasant one. Mishra pithily notes, In a massive and under-appreciated shift worldwide, people understand themselves in public life primarily as individuals with rights, desires and interests. After, as required by his social circle, genuflecting before the altar of gender equality and sexual tolerance resulting from this shift (which is only under-appreciated by liberals, not by conservatives, but I suspect Mishra reads no conservatives his lengthy, stream-of-consciousness bibliography contains none I can find), Mishra concludes The larger political implications of this revolutionary individualism, however, are much more ambiguous. By this he means they are the root of global violence, which is not ambiguous at all, but Mishra is unable to bring himself to full criticism of the modern project of ever-expanding freedom. Mishra appears to be struggling to parse out the common conservative thought that the destruction of intermediating institutions exposes the individual to systematic exploitation and widespread immiseration, where [M]any of these shocks of modernity were once absorbed by inherited social structures of family and community, and the states welfare cushions. That one sentence exemplifies Mishra's blend of insight and obtuseness. He shows a keen insight then ruins it with a reflexive obeisance to liberalism, which relies on facts not even true the states welfare cushions across the globe are far stronger than ever in every country, and in fact as they have grown, the inherited social structures have atrophied, which is not a coincidence, as many conservatives, from Robert Nisbet on, have demonstrated. Similarly, in the next paragraph, Mishra notes that the rights of people to life, liberty and security . . . are threatened by political dysfunction and economic stagnation then he continues that same sentence to equally blame climate change and inequality. Thus, throughout the book, original, or at least reasonably fresh in context, thoughts are followed by predictable, not-fresh thoughts. It is often tedious. So, for example, in the midst of thoughts about intermediating institutions, and in many other jarring and unexpected places, more references to climate change pop up, as if Mishra set himself a quota of times to refer to the issue to ensure that Globalized Pankaj would get the right approval by the right people. And he criticizes the easy availability of assault weapons in the United States [as having been] always likely to assist the privatization and socialization of violence. Leaving aside that I don't know what the socialization of violence" is, his example is Timothy McVeigh, who used a bomb. (But he partially redeems himself later in the book with a lengthy and insightful analysis of McVeigh, who actually does illustrate Mishra's core point.) Mishra states that there is a universal crisis, and that crisis is the result of the unprecedented political, economic and social disorder that accompanied the rise of the industrial capitalist economy in nineteenth-century Europe . . . now infecting much vaster regions and bigger populations . . . . In other words, the violence on which Mishra focuses is a necessary function of modernity. (Of course, Stephen Pinker would say this is all a crock, and modern violence is in fact far less than in the past. But if that's true, it doesn't feel like it to most people, and therefore does not affect *Age of Anger*.) Normally, I'd parse the book chapter-by-chapter. Not today, though, because *Age of Anger* is non-linear. There are several different chapters which, despite different headings, are all basically the same. You can jump into it at any point and not need to have read what came before, or what comes after, since there is no overarching analysis. Rather, the book is a series of epicycles revolving around the basic theme. The book's basic stock-in-trade is drawing attention to similarities between two seemingly dissimilar individuals or movements, and concluding that they are the same. Along the way Mishra sprinkles in continual references to, and quotations from, European thinkers. Dostoevsky. Herzen. Bakunin. Montaigne. Bentham. Smith. Paine. And, most of

all, Rousseau and Voltaire, whom he uses as exemplars of different views of man and his potential, with Rousseau, among 18th Century thinkers, being alone in his vision of how the Enlightenment program of willed, abstract social reform could cause deracination, self-hatred and vindictive rage. It is these features of modern life on which Mishra hangs the core of his book. All around, though, are lots of tangents, musings, and asides, which seem related, and are related, but exactly how often escapes the reader. This approach has its, um, limitations. Maybe Gabriele D'Annunzio has a lot in common with ISIS. But maybe not. Mishra's overarching theory, that the modern world creates violence because it harms the soul of man (not that he phrases it that way), is like saying that men do wrong because of original sin. It is true, but it is not explanatory in a way permitting action or improvement, other than of man as a whole. It would be simpler to say that man seeks transcendence and he will always choose it as against shopping malls. On the other hand, any particular section is pretty interesting, if elliptical. And it is certainly true that widespread modern terror is not an invention of ISIS, or Islam. At the end of the 19th Century and the beginning of the 20th, as Mishra points out, various types of anarchists engaged in large scale worldwide terrorism, including in America, and involving tens of thousands killed in Russia alone (admittedly the biggest focus of anarchism). Nor does Mishra's analysis and thought fall into simplistic buckets he is not anti-imperialist, Marxist, post-modernist or any such thing, probably because his thought is deeply rooted in substantial political thought and informed by his own upbringing. So, he relies only on European political thought, without apology. My intellectual formation has been largely European and American. . . . I find myself drawn most to German, Italian, Eastern European and Russian writers and thinkers. This is an interesting admission, because the implication, never fully stated, is that only European political thought matters. Of course, that's true: non-European political thought is of any real value. Can you name a first-rank non-European political philosopher who has any relevance to the modern world? I didn't think so. But I hope Globalized Pankaj didn't have to pay for this admission by having some tense dinner party conversations with delusory worshippers of diversity and inclusion. Mishra seems to think there is another approach to modernization that can avoid these problems, but he never outlines it or specifies its characteristics. He makes side references to this possibility, for example quoting an obscure Indonesian named Soedjatmoko to the effect that Communism and its kin having failed, still, the Western history of modernization is just one of several possible courses. We are never told what those other courses are, though. Perhaps there are hints, such as the quotation from Eric Voegelin, 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. This is followed by Mishra noting Indeed, the men trying to radicalize the liberal principle of freedom and autonomy, of individual power and agency, seem more rootless and desperate than before. I think he means violent men of all stripes, with ISIS as the exemplar. But what he should really mean, and Voegelin would agree, is that the entire ruling class of the West, which has indeed radicalized the liberal principle of freedom and autonomy, making an idol of so-called liberal democracy, has created the rootless and desperate, and they are everywhere, not just among the violent. Where freedom to do anything other than limit the freedom of others in any way is coupled with the liberty to vote, but only for more atomistic individualism, such that the modern world offers nothing to those seeking either community or transcendence, and opprobrium to those holding to traditional social values and norms, you get not universal satisfaction, but widespread despair. The other courses, then, might involve limiting freedom and working towards community. As far as those traditional social values and norms, Mishra oddly does not seem to understand that religion is a real driving force. He never mentions or discusses Christianity, the main religion of the West and the driver of its culture and values for a thousand years, in any material way. In fact, the only religions he discusses in detail are Hinduism and Islam, and then only insofar as they bear, or are claimed by some of their adherents to bear, on politics. As to the former, he only mentions it as part of his constant criticism of Hindu nationalism. i.e., he appears to not consider it as a belief system at all. As to Islam, he similarly does not consider it as a belief system, and rejects out of hand that Islam can inspire bad behavior. Such behavior by those who profess Islam is merely falsehood and their behavior is really driven by no different impulses than that that drove Mikhail Bakunin and the Russian anarchists, and Islamophobia is the result of irrational fears of the other driven by liquid modernity (Zygmunt Bauman's term for the instability of modern life, a term Mishra doesn't use, but could have used with great profit). This is silly and shows both a failure to understand religious believers and a failure to grasp Muslim theology. On the other hand, he shows flashes of insight tangentially related to religion, noting that ideologies, from the French Revolution on, are just as driven by religious belief as any formal religion. So, as always with Mishra, it's a mixed bag. Somewhere buried in this book is another book. It would be a linear examination of the effect of modernity on society and the resulting failures of liberal democracy, and suggest what might be done as a result. This other book would be about liquid modernity, and analyze how and why liberal democracy, far from being the end of history, is inadequate to feed the souls of men, and they will therefore instead fill up their souls with that which gives them transcendence. It would discuss why some men thereby turn to violence, what else they might turn to instead, and how such a turning could be encouraged, presumably through religion and thought opposed to, instead of encouraging of, violence. That book doesn't exist, of course, but nonetheless reading Age of Anger helps the reader grope in that direction, and so, despite its shortcomings, Mishra's book is far from worthless.

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review helpful. This is a broad and useful perspective - dense going after a while but an ...By Timothy JacksonThis is a broad and useful perspective - dense going after a while but an informative reminder that the USA has some atoning to do.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A good read.By Steven W. BellFabulous historical lens for seeing out times today. A good read.

One of our most important public intellectuals reveals the hidden history of our current global crisisHow can we explain the origins of the great wave of paranoid hatreds that seem inescapable in our close-knit worldfrom 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 promisesof freedom, stability, and prosperitywere increasingly susceptible to demagogues. The many who came late to this new worldor were left, or pushed, behindreacted 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 aroseangry 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 modernitywith 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.

Mishra may well be the ideal writer to diagnose our current moment . . . In *Age of Anger*, Mishra has produced an urgent analysis of a moment in which the forgotten and dispossessed are rising up to challenge everything we thought we knew about the state of the world. Sebastian Strangio, *Los Angeles of Books*Important, erudite . . . Mishra dwells in the realm of ideas and emotions, which get short shrift in most accounts of global politics. So it's bracing and illuminating for him to focus on feelings . . . A decent liberalism would read sharp critics like Mishra and learn. Franklin Foer, *The New York Times Book* "Columnist and historian Pankaj Mishra has named a moment and an era: His brilliant new book *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* looks at the rising tide of radical nationalism, racism, intolerance, misogyny, xenophobia, and fascism that's sweeping away calmer and more measured opposition all over the world, and he attempts to understand the phenomena before it engulfs everybody on the planet. . . Fiercely literate and eloquent. Steve Donoghue, *The Christian Science Monitor*In its literacy and literariness, [*Age of Anger*] has the feel of Edmund Wilsons extraordinary dramas of modern ideasbooks like *To the Finland Station*but with a different endpoint and a more global canvas. Mishra reads like a brilliant autodidact, putting to shame the many students who dutifully did the reading for their classes but missed the incandescent fire and penetrating insight in canonical texts. Samuel Moyn, *The New Republic*In probing for the wellspring of todays anger [Pankaj Mishra] hits on something real. He traces our current mood back to the French Enlightenment of the 18th century. We revere its thinkers today for their devotion to reason, science, and the rights of man, but they were disdainful of their fellow citizens, who clung to their muskets and their religion . . . Along with quotations from Voltaire, Rousseau, and other familiar figures of Western Civ, *Age of Anger* includes observations from Iranian, Chinese, Indian, Japanese, and other nations scholars; their perspectives complement Mishras deep understanding of global tensions. Peter Coy, *Bloomberg Businessweek*Erudite [In] *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*, which was conceived before Brexit and Trump, the Indian nonfiction writer and novelist Pankaj Mishra argues that our current rage has deep historical roots. Bryan Walsh, *Time*Richly learned and usefully subversive. John Gray, *Literary* A bowel-churning kick in the guts . . . [Pankaj Mishra's] vision is unusually broad, accommodating and resistant to categorisation. It is the kind of vision the world needs right now . . . *Age of Anger* is vitally germane to the global expressions of discontent that we are now witnessing Christopher de Bellaigue, *Financial Times*[An] ambitious world history of anti-progressive backlash. New York A disturbing but imperatively urgent analysis. Bryce Christensen, *Booklist* (starred review)A probing, well-informed investigation of global unrest calling for truly transformative thinking about humanity's future. Kirkus s (starred review)With a deep knowledge of both Western and non-Western history, and like no other before him, Pankaj Mishra comes to grips with the malaise at the heart of these dangerous times. This is the most astonishing, convincing, and disturbing book Ive read in years. Joe SaccoIn this urgent, profound and extraordinarily timely study, Pankaj Mishra follows the likes of Isaiah Berlin, John Gray and Mark Lilla by delving into the past in order to throw light on our contemporary predicament, when the neglected and dispossessed of the world have suddenly risen up in Nietzschean resentment to transform the world we thought we knew. John Banville"*In Age of Anger: A History of the Present*, Pankaj Mishra offers a panoramic survey of the populist wind roiling the world and a genealogy of the resentment propelling it. Lucid, incisive and provocative, the book may be the most ambitious effort yet to diagnose our social condition. With erudition and insight, it explains why movements from below are entrusting their future to paternalistic demagogues in the expectation of rewards from above." Muhammad Idrees Ahmad, *The National*About

the Author Pankaj Mishra is the author of *From the Ruins of Empire* and several other books. He is a columnist at Bloomberg View and the New York Times Book Review, and writes regularly for *The Guardian*, the London Review of Books, and *The New Yorker*. A fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, he lives in London.