

Age of Anger

A History of the Present

by Pankaj Mishra

Reviewed by Sophie Dulesh

Pankaj Mishra claims that his book “aims to reveal some historically recurrent phenomena across the world, and their common underlying source in one of the most extraordinary events of human history: the advent of a commercial-industrial civilization in the West and then its replication elsewhere.” A serious claim, indeed.

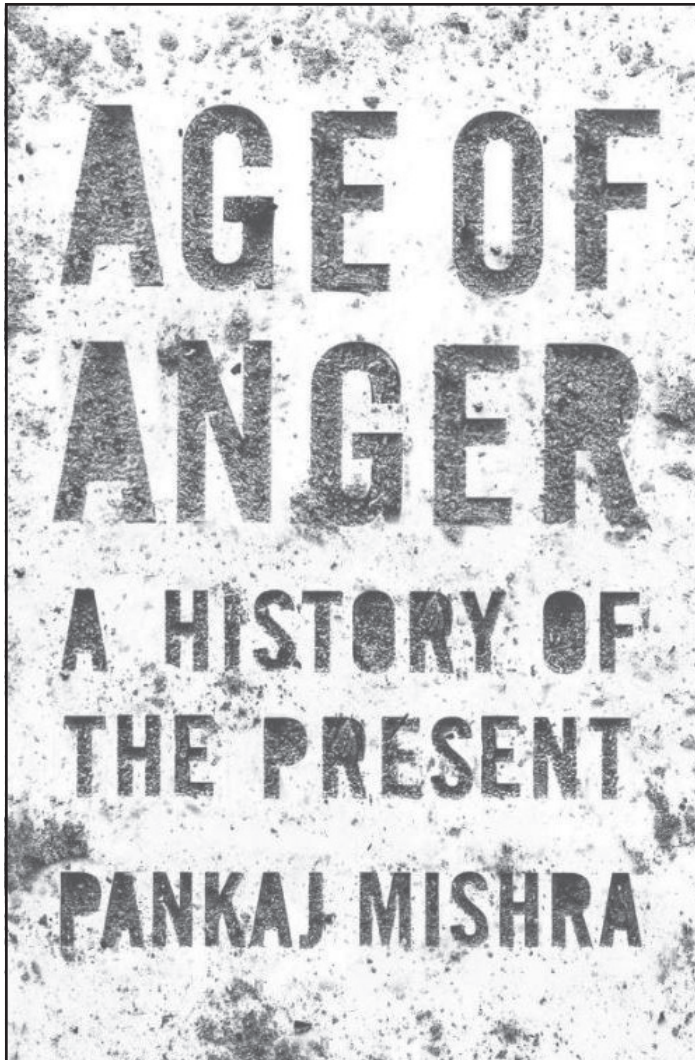
Mishra achieves his objective spectacularly: the book is a balanced, exhaustive, and profoundly erudite review of the “West and the rest at present” and how we got here, replete with original ideas. His fine-tuned attention to the intellectual landscape of different countries (the West, Russia, Turkey, the Middle East, India, eastern Asia) at various epochs, as expressed not only in the social sciences but also in literature and the arts, is highly commendable: it enriches the narrative and makes it palpable and three-dimensional, as if the reader were living among those people. The reading is easy and enjoyable.

I have only one major point of disagreement with Mishra: he claims that the Islamic religion and culture have been wrongly accused of inciting global terror that has spread around the planet like an epidemic in the last

few decades. Mishra believes that this epidemic has nothing to do with Islam and everything to do with income inequality: “The key to mimic man’s behavior lies not in any clash of opposed civilizations, but, on the contrary, in irresistible mimetic desire: the logic of fascination, emulation and righteous self-assertion that binds the rivals inseparably. It lies in *ressentiment*... We come closer to understanding *ressentiment* today when we recognize that it arises out of an intensely competitive human desire for convergence and resemblance rather than religious, cultural, theological and ideological difference.”

Well, it is true that millions of have-nots ‘look at the Joneses’ and feel bitter resentment. But it is capitalism that has been uniquely successful in elevating multitudes from poverty.

Mishra blames the West: “Unlike the familiar and comprehensible violence of European left-wing and ultra-nationalist groups, terrorist acts by Muslims were placed in some non-human never-never land, far outside of the history of the secular modern world. Their ‘jihad’ seemed integral to Islamic civilization; and obsession burgeoned with the ‘Islamic’ roots of terrorism, metamorphosing quickly into a campaign to ‘reform’ Islam itself.”



**AGE OF ANGER:
A HISTORY OF THE PRESENT**
Pankaj Mishra
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (February 7, 2017)
416 pages, \$27 (hardcover)
ISBN-13: 978-0-374274788

In other words, he hints that Islam is being demonized by the West. And it is true that there is anti-Muslim bigotry in some circles. But neither bigotry nor Mishra's views explain why the recent spread of radical Islam around the globe coincides so closely with the spread of international terror and why there are such striking differences between the various forms of domestic terrorism and global Islamic terrorism. Mishra groups them all together in his analysis and obscures the picture.

Domestic terror has been a universal primal way of self-assertion since time immemorial. Political assassinations eliminated particular offenders inside or outside of their country. In contrast, the global terror tactic of mass-mur-

dering strangers in foreign lands as a form of protest is new.

The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism created the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), the largest, most comprehensive database on terrorist attacks around the world from 1970 onward. The Global Terrorism Index is based on data from the GTD in consultation with an expert panel of the Global Peace Index and covers 163 countries or 99.7% of the world's population.

According to their definition,

Global terrorism refers to terrorism that goes beyond national boundaries in terms of the methods used, the people that are targeted or the places from which the terrorists operate. Since the emergence of Al Qaida in the 1990s, global terrorism has become largely synonymous with Islamist terrorism...

Between 1969 and 2009, there were 38,345 global terrorist incidents around the world. Of those attacks, 7.8 percent (2,981) were directed against the United States... Nearly 5,600 people lost their lives and more than 16,300 people suffered injuries due to international terrorism directed at the United States... From 2001 to 2009, ... [d]omestic terror-

ism killed eight people [in the US], while international terrorism killed 3,861— more than 482 times the number of domestic terrorist fatalities.

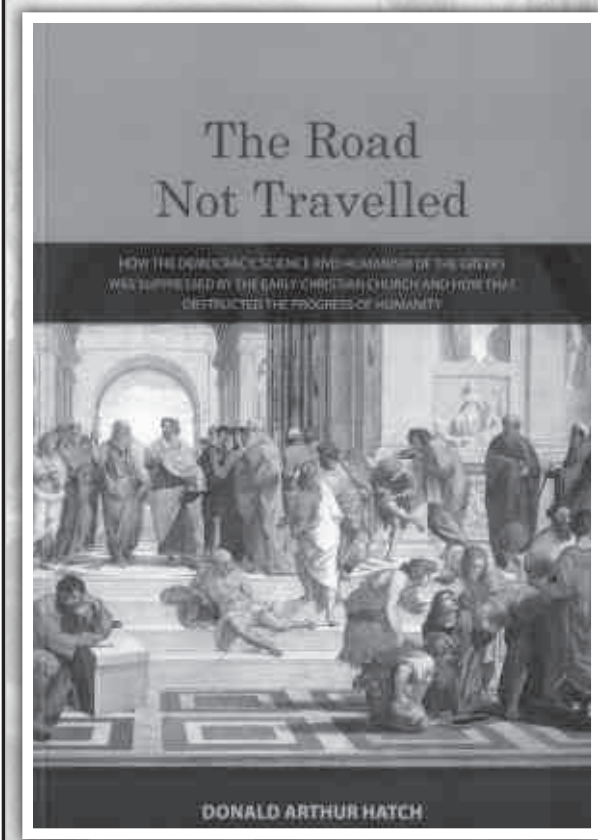
Our ways of protesting, like everything else, are defined by culture and tradition. For instance, the idea to self-immolate like Buddhist monks or desperate Afghan women might never cross the mind of a Westerner, no matter how desperately unhappy. And the Buddhists and Afghan women never resort to the terror tactic of mailing anthrax-laced powder to their offenders. It is the same with global terror: the idea to protest Syrian war atrocities, for example, by blowing up strangers en masse in Glasgow or Bali is alien to all but Islamists. Neither the Tamil Tigers, the Norwegian supremacist, the Oklahoma bomber, nor the Japanese subway sarin attackers, among others, committed mass assaults outside their own countries.

I see at least one major reason for the difference: it takes much effort and expense to or-

ganise an attack far away, to establish a base in Glasgow or Casablanca. Only Islam is uniquely equipped in this respect because it is, in the words of Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan Al-Banna, “a religion and a state.” As such, Islam has a unique organisational network, controlling every step of its followers’ lives, set up and ready for use at any time. That is why “since the 1990s... global terrorism has become largely synonymous with Islamist terrorism.”

But this discrepancy of our opinions notwithstanding, I strongly recommend this wide-ranging, educational and thought-provoking book written in the best humanist traditions; reading it is very much worth your time. •

Sophie Dulesh MD, PhD, Dr of Sci, worked for 27 years as a medical practitioner and researcher in Russia before immigrating to Canada in 1980, where she worked as an MD for another 23 years. Since then, Sophie has pursued many other interests, including philosophy, the history of religion, and writing on a range of subjects.



Donald Hatch has packed each page with knowledge and with thoughtful comments about our past and about the emergence of a hopeful future as we proceed from the path of religious superstition and supernaturalism into a more enlightened time.

— Goldwin Emerson, Ph.D.

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