

**Mishra, Pankaj – Age of Anger: A History of the Present**

*Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017, [Surrounding Knowledge] Grade* ★★★★★

I'm quite torn about this book. On the one hand it is monumental and thought provoking, on the other hand I feel that it's intellectually dishonest. Indian born but UK resident, Pankaj Mishra is an author of several books, a columnist for a number of well known publications in the US and UK and he is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. The *Age of Anger* has been tooted as a book that lets us understand the new post-liberal world we are entering. The author's thesis is that the "angriness" of our age, be it expressed by Islamic terror, the election of aggressive populist leaders - like Narendra Modi in India or Donald Trump in the US - or by the UK exodus from the EU, is really a global sequel to an earlier European resistance towards the enlightenment and its acolyte the liberal market economy. Osama Bin Laden is our time's Mikhail Bakunin. Mishra tells a story of a pendulum movement through time. Just like the romantic movement of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century in the author's narrative was a countermovement against the enlightenment that ended in Marxist and fascist outbreaks of violence, our time's reactions against the globalized neo-liberal market economy will, according to Mishra, end in World War III.

The structure of the book is that the author first over a few chapters outlines his thesis, then the voluminous mid-section is dedicated to endless examples and historic references that are meant to display the connection between the previous European counter-movement and the current global one. Finally the author in the end again outlines his proposed Hegelian process towards human destruction. The amount of name-dropping in the central part is close to numbing. For those not supremely interested in a detailed exposé of historic anti-enlightenment composers, poets, philosophers, writers etc. and who only want the gist of the author's argument the middle section can be disregarded.

Why do I think the writing to be intellectually dishonest? The author tries to portray himself as

an objective observer and analyst of this pendulous movement between the enlightenment and its critics. He is only reporting the truth as he (alone) has discovered it. Mishra is anything but impartial. It is not that he shies away from describing the violence of fascists and Islamists but he understands them and their actions are explained by the necessity to react. They are almost excused. When describing the enlightenment, globalization and market economy the tone is hardly equally understanding. The contempt, loathing and scorn displayed when discussing the guilty party is distasteful and frankly bordering on childish.

Enlightenment critics have always seen the belief in reason as oppression and the conviction around universal truths as Western cultural imperialism. Also, from day one the industrial revolution as well as the scientific revolution that followed the enlightenment was accused of killing the spirituality of mankind. The *Age of Anger* adds nothing new in this respect. Mishra is obviously right in that the argumentation of earlier German romanticists, Marxists and fascists as well as today's Islamists, populists and left wing neo-colonialists often are strikingly similar when it comes to these topics. This is however hardly a solid foundation for a theory of a deterministic road to hell for humanity.

I am not one to take the rootlessness of people in a globalized world lightly. Liberalism is just a framework of freedom that should be filled with things that give meaning to life. At the same time it becomes absurd to describe our age's Western World as bordering to hell on Earth. It makes you wonder why Mishra would want to stay in London and attend the meetings of the Royal Society? One is reminded of the intellectual father of the post-colonialist theory, Edward Said, who sat in comfort at his Columbia University professor's chair.

This book will delight the anti-Western cadre. Its confrontational style will however make any discussion of the relevant topics impossible.

Mats Larsson, September 11, 2017