

## Age of Anger by Pankaj Mishra: a review

*Age of Anger* by the Indian intellectual Pankaj Mishra, published in 2017,<sup>1</sup> is a valuable, even an important work that systematically demolishes the majority media and official government view of Islamic fundamentalism as being something alien to Western democratic societies, with its roots in a primitive, backward rejection of the modern world and its presumed values. Mishra's profound and wide ranging argument demonstrates with startling clarity that Islam is merely a historically determined colouring assumed by a much more general, widespread phenomenon which appears, in other conditions, as Hindu or Buddhist fundamentalism, White supremacism, the populism that has fuelled the Trump and Brexit electoral victories, and the authoritarian regimes in Poland and Hungary, to give but a few examples.

The lynchpin of Mishra's argument is the concept of "resentment", though he generally prefers the French term "*ressentiment*" which he borrows from the French philosopher René Girard. For Girard, this feeling of resentment towards others is one of human psychology's major original driving forces. He sees in it the fruit of a "mimetic desire" (another of Girard's key concepts) common to all human beings, to possess not any particular object, but rather the very being of another person, who is adopted as a model. Since this desire to be like another, to resemble (or to imitate) another in those qualities which one considers desirable, can never be satisfied, then inevitably "*The disciple thinks himself condemned and humiliated. He thinks that his model judges him unworthy to participate in the superior life which he himself enjoys*". Since everyone can be both model and disciple, "*The disciple's position is clearly the only necessary one, the one through which we must define the fundamental human situation*".<sup>2</sup> Resentment, for Girard, is the emotion felt by the disciple towards his model (who may not even be aware that he is a model) as a result of the impossibility of resembling him, all the more so since the model is never what the disciple takes him for. This is a fundamental aspect of the human condition which it is impossible to get around: "*In man, at the level of desire, there is a mimetic tendency which comes from his very depths, often taken up and reinforced by outside voices (...) Humans are made in such a way that that they are constantly sending each other contradictory signals, each one unaware that he is laying a trap for the other, all the less so since he is himself falling into a similar trap*".

While Mishra adopts the concept, he adapts it to his own argumentation. Whereas for Girard, the origins of resentment are to be found in the very nature of the human species, Mishra transforms it into something much more specific since he identifies its beginnings in the 18th century, during the first stage of capitalist globalisation. It is much more than an easily understandable economic resentment directed by the poor against the rich. Rather, for Mishra, it is the result of a sense of loss of cultural reference points, and of one's sense of one's own value, suffered by those who are subjected to capitalism's "*Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation which distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones*" as Marx put it in 1848.<sup>3</sup> This unending process, which is inherent to capitalist conditions of production, constantly generates a wealthy elite of winners and a vast mass of losers whose cultural references have been demolished without offering any material compensation in return, and who thus feel "*condemned and humiliated*", judged "*unworthy*" of participation in the enviable existence of the "winners". The model of existence proposed by the elite creates aspirations that are deeply contradictory. It seems at once immensely desirable and hopelessly out of reach. It represents modernity, the new, while at the same time it rejects older cultural references as "backward" and "outdated". This is not the same thing as the notorious "clash of civilisations" idea to which we are treated from time to time. The humiliated cultures may be ancient, or they may just as well be the creation of capitalism itself: for example, the workers' culture of Britain's coal-mining areas devastated by the closure of the mines, or even much more generally the whole "traditional" workers' condition which has been for years treated with contempt by politicians and the media on the grounds that it opposes the ineluctable advance of digital modernity.

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<sup>1</sup> *Age of Anger*, Penguin Books, 2017 (Kindle edition). Notes indicating quotes refer to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> René Girard, *La violence et le sacré*, Pluriel 2010, p218 (my translation)

<sup>3</sup> *Communist Manifesto*

The experience of resentment may be individual or more broadly cultural. It seems to me that we can make a distinction between the frustration expressed by the intellectuals from colonised cultures, who aspire to participate in a modernity supposedly represented by advanced capitalism, and those who find themselves marginalised within capitalist society. This distinction is of course rather schematic, since any culture only finds expression through historically determined individuals. But the frustration of the intellectual strata is often more complex and ambivalent: they aspire to be accepted into a coveted modernity, while at the same time they reject it because it humiliates the ancient cultures of which they feel themselves to be the custodians, yet they are separated by their education and their class situation, from those masses who are the embodiment of their culture and whom they hope to rally to its defence.

Mishra does not claim to be the first to identify “resentment”, on the contrary he situates himself in a long tradition. Amongst others he cites Nietzsche – that virulent critic of bourgeois hypocrisy and mediocrity – who talks of a “*whole tremulous realm of subterranean revenge, inexhaustible and insatiable in outbursts*”; the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore’s description, in 1916 during a tour of the USA, of a “*dense, poisonous atmosphere of worldwide suspicion and greed and panic*”; the political philosopher Hannah Arendt’s “*tremendous increase in mutual hatred and a somewhat universal irritability of everybody against everybody else*” – to which Mishra adds “*existential resentment of other peoples’ being, caused by an intense mix of envy and sense of humiliation and powerlessness*”. Clearly the characteristics of capitalism’s social decomposition are not, in their essence, something new. Mishra takes us back to the historical sources of “resentment” in its intellectual form, when capitalism was still limited to a small number of European countries. He also brings it up-to-date so that we can see concretely how it takes shape within today’s globalised capitalism, where a process of destruction and the sensation of betrayal and inadequacy are no longer limited to the literate strata of societies being left behind by the rapid development of first Britain and then the USA, but are worldwide and affect even broad strata of the very class which the development of capitalism has itself called into being: the industrial proletariat.

Mishra’s conclusions are almost intolerably bleak, all the more so because they ring so true: “*In the regime of privatization, commodification, deregulation and militarization it is barely possible to speak without inviting sarcasm about those qualities that distinguish humans from other predatory animals – trust, co-operation, community, dialogue and solidarity. In our state of worldwide emergency, extrajudicial murder, torture and secret detentions no longer provoke widespread condemnation, disgust and shame. Popular culture as well as state policy has made them seem normal (...) [The demagogues like Trump] encourage the suspicion – potentially lethal among the hundreds of millions of people condemned to superfluosity – that the present order, democratic or authoritarian, is built upon force and fraud; they incite a broader and more apocalyptic mood than we have witnessed before*” (pp333/352). In his final sentence he calls for “*transformative thinking*”, and one can only agree. The question that Mishra leaves unanswered, however, is precisely the burning one of where that transformative thinking is to come from, and how — even more difficult perhaps — it is to gain a hearing.

If we follow Mishra’s argument, it seems undeniable that the source of the “transformative thinking” that society needs can only be found within existing relations of production. But it is also indisputable that any transformation capable of bringing to an end the catastrophic effects of capitalism that he describes so well, could only call into question the privileges and indeed the existence of the present system’s ruling and owning classes. Thus the “transformative” thinking for which Mishra calls can only be a revolutionary way of thinking, in other words a thought capable of a revolutionary transformation of the world.

We are drawn, unavoidably, to the revolutionary thought of Karl Marx.

In his 1939 biography of Karl Marx, the Oxford philosopher Isaiah Berlin remarked that Marx has, in effect, won the intellectual battle over the interpretation of history: no serious historian today would try to describe the historical process as an unfolding of the Hegelian idea, or as governed by the deeds of great men. This is true (though only up to a point, as we shall see), and Mishra’s book is an admirable example, for although it is very much a work that concerns ideas, and even emotions, their origins are always identified in the very concrete, material processes of industrial capitalism’s conquest of the planet. Contrary to what those we might call “vulgar materialists” believe, human action is not fundamentally driven by a rational perception of one’s own direct material interests, but by complex psychological and emotional factors that are never merely a mechanical expression of an individual’s class background; otherwise it would be impossible to

explain, for example, how workers in the American rustbelt, under unbearable pressure from falling wages, unemployment, and an opioid epidemic, could believe that voting for a fraudulent multi-bankrupt billionaire could improve their situation. The problem then, goes far beyond an economic reaction to unemployment or low wages, to “*the quintessential inner experience of modernity for most people: the uprooted outsider in the commercial metropolis: aspiring for a place in it, and struggling with complex feelings of envy, fascination, revulsion and rejection*” (p94). Hence “*The Pied Pipers of ISIS have grasped particularly keenly that insulted and injured men, whether in Parisian banlieues or Asian and African shanty towns, can be turned into obedient and fearless fighters if they are given a rousing cause to fight for, especially one connected, however tenuously, with the past glory of Islam, and aimed at exterminating the world of soul-killing mediocrity, cowardice, opportunism and immoral deal-making*” (p54).

This approach, which connects phenomena that may seem purely ideological and yet which guide people’s actions, to their material sources anchored within the system of production – in other words to the social relations into which people enter to ensure the reproduction of their life – is subtle and eminently materialist. And yet there is a weakness in the argument nonetheless. Mishra often describes the effects of global capitalism, financial capitalism, “qualified” capitalism but never of capitalism as such. This is a fundamental problem, which we can illustrate with the issue of “globalisation”. This is often decried as the source of a multiplicity of ills, for which are prescribed a multiplicity of solutions. But globalisation has been part of capitalism’s DNA since its beginnings: it is precisely one of capitalism’s fundamental characteristics to spread throughout the planet, and to break down all barriers to its expansion by violence if necessary (as for example in the Opium Wars waged by Britain against China at the beginning of the 19th century). To ask for a capitalism without globalisation comes down to asking for a non-capitalist capitalism.

All half-way serious historians today have adopted the materialist sociological-economic vision pioneered by Marx, with the exception of two fundamental premises which radically distinguish marxism from simple materialism.

The first of these premises, is that every social form contains a dynamic that goes beyond itself, to its own overcoming: this is the principle of the materialist dialectic. Every ruling class necessarily thinks that it represents the *nec plus ultra* of human development (as an example, we could point to Francis Fukuyama’s notorious inanity about “the end of history” following the collapse of the Soviet bloc), whereas for marxism no social form is permanent, all are destined to perish and to mutate into a new form.

The second premise is that this dynamic is not abstract, on the contrary it is concretised within a social class which both embodies and prefigures the new social relations which must necessarily develop within the existing social system; hence this class is called to play a revolutionary role in the passage from the existing social system to the one which is to follow.

This is why Marx insisted, as the well-known expression from the *Manifesto* has it, that “*The theoretical conclusions of the Communists (...) merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes*”.

Clearly, the argument presented here is a very cursory one (it would require a whole series of articles to go further), but it will serve, I hope, to explain why this critique of Mishra’s book is founded on a Marxist viewpoint.

## The history of “resentment”

Mishra identifies the origins of resentment in the 18th century, in the early stages of capitalism’s globalisation. His two main protagonists of this period, Rousseau and Voltaire, serve as representatives of a more general phenomenon. Voltaire stands for the intellectual elite that identifies with modernity and progress – and does very well out of it: he died one of the richest men in Europe. Mishra makes the important point that although the Enlightenment is seen today as the fountainhead of liberal and democratic values, there was nothing democratic about its leading figures: both Voltaire and Diderot placed their confidence in “enlightened despots” like Catherine the Great of Russia and Frederick of Prussia to realise their prescriptions for society, rather than in popular power: “*We have never claimed*”, Voltaire wrote: “*to enlighten shoemakers and servant girls*” (p61). Voltaire, to use Mishra’s phrase, was an unapologetic top-down moderniser. One can’t help thinking that Mishra is rather unfair to Voltaire’s reputation here. There is a certain amount of *ad hominem* argument which attacks Voltaire as a person rather than his ideas, some of

which – religious tolerance, opposition to superstition, freedom of speech – played an important part in social progress and indeed in the development of the workers’ movement. That said, he does make a convincing case that Voltaire’s enthusiasm for English freedom in the form of the London Stock Exchange (Voltaire himself was an accomplished and successful speculator), his social position as an intellectual advisor to a rising bourgeois elite and demolisher of their adversaries’ ideological positions, makes him, in social terms at least, a role model and precursor of the pro-globalisation business, financial, and media elite of the 21st century.

Voltaire was successful, but in absolutist aristocratic 18th century France he was nonetheless a successful upstart, a man who began life – at a time when to be wealthy above all meant to possess land – with no wealth. Another member of this upstart intellectual class was Rousseau who, despite contributing nearly 400 articles to Diderot’s monumental Encyclopaedia, adopted a radically different attitude to the intellectual Enlightenment and above all to the new social and economic forms which underpinned it. Progress, declared Rousseau, far from liberating man, enslaves him: man is tied down by institutions that demolish his natural capacity for friendship, empathy, and social life. In the commercial society that Voltaire celebrated, Rousseau wrote, “*sincere friendship, real esteem and perfect confidence are banished from among men. Jealousy, suspicion, fear, coldness, reserve, hate and fraud are constantly concealed under that uniform*” (quoted p90). For Mishra, Rousseau “*described the quintessential inner experience of modernity*”.

Rousseau set out to represent the underdog, the poor and under-privileged; to do so, the social framework he proposed was that of patriotism. But Rousseau's patriotism was not the real defence of an existing nation-state with its frontiers and class divided society, rather it is the patriotism of an imaginary nation of shared tradition, community, and authority. This ideal nation was a thoroughly idealised version of ancient Sparta, where “*disinterestedness, equity, and peace reigned*” (p108). The individual, for Rousseau, should subordinate himself to the national community for the sake, not of any communal goals, but of his own freedom. The national community is by definition antagonistic to those around it; his patriotism is militaristic, and male. Woman’s role is confined to the breeding and rearing of healthy – and virile – male citizens, whereas commercial society, with its threat to old-established patriarchy risks enervating male virility. As the English radical (and author of *Vindication of the rights of woman*) Mary Wollstonecraft remarked, women for Rousseau were to be no more than “*gentle domestic brutes*”. The male fear of emasculation by liberated female sexuality is a theme to which we shall return.

For Mishra, Rousseau is the archetype, or perhaps rather the first outstanding exemplar, of a new human experience characteristic of the globalised, commercial world. Voltaire is the epitome of the successful “intellectual as consultant”, at ease in the glittering world of the Paris salon and detached from the real emotional lives of those he wishes to “enlighten”, whether they like it or not. Against Voltaire, Rousseau speaks for the outsider who feels rejected by Voltaire’s world and yet cannot escape its fascination, who longs for its recognition while trying to convince himself that he stands against it. Hence jealous imitation (Mishra prefers the Girardian “mimesis” and introduces the idea of “mimetic man”) and resentment go hand in hand, and create an explosive emotional experience which can only intensify historically, since it is founded in the social reality of capitalism’s uneven development and constant destabilisation of our lived humanity.<sup>4</sup>

Nowhere was Rousseau read with more enthusiasm than in Germany, especially after Napoleon’s invasion and his defeat of all the most powerful German states, Prussia and Austria in particular.<sup>5</sup> Germany’s intelligentsia was especially susceptible to this mixture of injured self-esteem, resentment, and the desire to belong to the dynamic and powerful modern world whose pillars – at the end of the 18th century – were British industrialism and the French Enlightenment.

The German intelligentsia could hardly be unaware of the world stature of a German culture which produced such figures as Kant, Beethoven, and Goethe. Yet in social terms, it found itself sandwiched between a

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<sup>4</sup> “*Whether in his denunciation of moral corruption, his claim that the metropolis was a den of vice and that virtue resided in ordinary people (whom the elite routinely conspired against and deceived), his praise of militant patriotism, his distrust of intellectual technocracy, his advocacy of a return to the collective, the ‘people’, or his concern for the ‘stranger’, Rousseau anticipated the modern underdog with his aggravated sense of victimhood and demand for redemption*” (*Age of anger*, Chapter 3).

<sup>5</sup> Remember that until the declaration of the German Empire in 1871, following the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian war, Germany as such did not exist, being rather a plethora of more or less petty principalities.

backward aristocracy and a timid bourgeoisie of limited horizons on the one hand, and an uneducated peasant mass on the other. Not surprisingly, the intelligentsia found inspiration in the French Revolution, and when the Napoleonic armies invaded the Rhineland they often found a ready welcome in German towns. But this initial enthusiasm was shattered by the actual experience of French occupation; far from being integrated as equals into the dynamic of modernity, Germans found themselves treated by Napoleon's armies as nothing better than a source of canon-fodder for his wars in Russia and Spain.

German Romanticism, expressed in the works of thinkers and artists such as the philosopher Herder and Schiller the dramatist, arose in response to this situation of perceived inferiority and real weakness.<sup>6</sup> Paradoxically, romanticism rests on two postulates which might appear to be mutually exclusive: the first is the supreme, ineffable value of the individual ego; the second, the idea that the self can only exist through identification with, and even sacrifice for a national-cultural community. It did not matter to the German nationalists who adopted Herder that his – and indeed their – national community was essentially mythological, since their aim was to transform this myth into reality. The main point was to deny the universality of the values of the Enlightenment expressed in the French Revolution, in particular the inescapable nature of Reason as the basis for ordering human affairs.

It is not hard to draw parallels with ISIS and its attraction for the uprooted young men who have provided its fighters. ISIS too is based on a mythological version of the Muslim *umma* and its caliphate, which has precious little to do with historical reality; all the talk by western sub-intellectuals about a supposed “clash of civilisations” between Islam and the West merely avoids the uncomfortable truth that ISIS and its barbarism is a mimetic product of the capitalist world order it claims to reject. The young ISIS fighters presented by the media as brainwashed zombies are in reality tortured by their own lack of self-worth – many of them entered adult life as petty criminals with drug problems – and desperately in search of some means of self-affirmation (it also tends to be forgotten how far the German romantics were obsessed with the themes of blood and self-sacrifice to a cause – themes that would echo all through the 19th century and well into the middle of the 20th).

It is indicative of the point to which capitalism as a social system has become an obstacle to human progress, that German Romanticism not only produced great works of art, it gave expression to German unification and the struggle against feudal backwardness and particularism, whereas the ISIS Caliphate's only ambition is to prepare the destruction of human society in an Islamic version of the Christian fundamentalist Last Days. The ideology of ISIS (and more generally of this kind of fundamentalism) is thus a theorisation of despair. However, this despair springs not just from a rejection of capitalism's “liberal model”, but also from the failure of a model which once seemed to offer an alternative: the planned state capitalism of the Soviet Union. This model, adopted and adapted by Nasser for the Arab countries, or by Nehru for India, inspired a whole generation of leaders and intellectuals in the so-called “Third World” countries, all the more since it presented itself explicitly in opposition to the imperialist capitalism represented by the United States and the old European colonial powers. This model broke down definitively with the collapse of the USSR, and the descent into a pit of corruption and incompetence by the old anti-colonialist leaders, of whom Mubarak and Mugabe have been especially eminent examples. Even the “Mandela effect” turned out to be a one-off, and proved ineffective against the system of endemic corruption created by his successor Jacob Zuma.

Finally, even if it concerns just a single individual, the case of Ahmed al-Darawy is certainly significant. This one-time leader of the Tahrir Square movement, advocate of a modernised Islam, seems to have been reduced to despair by the incompetence of the elected Islamist Morsi regime that came to power after Mubarak's overthrow, and the cynicism of the Sisi military regime that replaced it; he died fighting for ISIS.

## The nationalist heritage

If Rousseau's onslaught on Voltaire and the cosmopolitan commercial elite is the first example of resentment, Mishra identifies the Italian nationalist Mazzini (1805-1872) as the man who made it go viral. During the 19th century the Italian national liberation movement, along with that in Poland, was in the spotlight of

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<sup>6</sup> For a profound study of German Romanticism see *The roots of romanticism* by Isaiah Berlin, Princeton University Press, 2001

progressive aspirations.<sup>7</sup> Far more than 18th-century Germany, 19th century Italy was a country whose past glory provided a sad contrast, for its intelligentsia, with its impoverished, divided, and backward present. These were the young men to whom Mazzini appealed with his nationalist rhetoric of self-sacrifice in the name of a higher duty; indeed he criticised the French Revolution for its arid bourgeois individualism, “*a cold doctrine of rights, the last formula of individualism*” (quoted p231). Mazzini’s fantasy Italy was not only to unite, it was to become a “*Third Rome*” which would bring “*a new and powerful unity to all the nations of Europe*”, do away with “*Ottoman papacy*”, and “*civilise Asia*” (quoted p231-2). For Mishra, Mazzini’s grandiloquent efforts were a complete failure, and I can’t help thinking that he rather downplays his importance in the process of Italian unification. Mazzini did not live to see his Third Rome undertake its civilising mission in the conquest of Libya, and he might well have recoiled at the bloodthirsty language of the popular novelist Alfredo Oriani writing at the turn of the century: “*War is an inevitable form of the struggle for existence, and blood will always be the best warm rain for great ideas (...) the future of Italy lies entirely in war which, while giving it its natural boundaries, will cement internally, through the anguish of mortal perils, the unity of the national spirit*” (quoted p237). Oriani, however, is merely taking the dreams of renewed Italian glory and hegemony to their logical, real-world conclusion. His words are a salutary reminder, in the face of all today’s talk about “human rights”, “humanitarian intervention” and ‘European values’, of the prevalence within European thinking generally at the end of the 19th century, of an obsession with violence, blood, and imperial destiny as the condition for national unity, which was almost invariably accompanied by a fear of men’s emasculation and “effeminacy” especially when the male population failed to show the appropriate enthusiasm for military adventure.

The most striking aspect of the Mazzini story in today’s context, is the extent to which his writings, and his national-revolutionary organisation Young Italy, inspired imitators outside Europe, producing amongst others, Young Turks, Young Egypt, Young India, and Young China. The Young Turks in particular achieved the practical success that always eluded Mazzini, overthrowing the Ottoman Sultanate and opening the way to the creation of a secular Turkish state. The importance of the other groups lies not so much in their immediate success (or lack of it) as in their role as the conduit for national-imperialist ideas born in 19th-century Europe, which they adapted and morphed into new forms influenced by the local culture. Young Egypt, for example, was founded by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani who went on to become, according to Mishra, “*the first ideologist of political Islam*”. An even more direct connection can be found to India in the person of Vinayak Savarkar, who became an enthusiastic disciple of Mazzini while studying in England in the 1900s. There is a direct filiation from Savarkar’s Hindu Mahasabha party founded in 1937 to the fascistic Rashtriya Swayamsavak Sangh (RSS), a paramilitary organisation that has been deeply implicated in India’s recent anti-Muslim pogroms, and is one of the pillars of PM Narendra Modi’s popular support. Mishra highlights Savarkar’s fear of emasculation, and his proposed antidotes: Hindus should abandon “*suicidal ideas about chivalry to women*” and values like “*humility, self-surrender and forgiveness*”, and should instead “*study habits of hatred, retaliation, and vindictiveness*” (quoted p261). It is striking that, just as Arab nationalists have often expressed their admiration for, and desire to imitate, the national cohesion of the Jews, so Savarkar urged Hindus to adopt Muslims’ “*fierce unity of faith, that social cohesion and valorous fervour which makes them as a body so irresistible*”. Mishra’s conclusion is that “*It is impossible to understand [these intellectuals and the movements in which they participated], and the eventual products of their efforts (Islamism, Hindu nationalism, Zionism, Chinese nationalism), without grasping their European intellectual background of cultural decay and pessimism: the anxiety in the unconscious that Freud was hardly alone in sensing, or the idea of glorious rebirth after decline and decadence, borrowed from the Christian idea of resurrection that Mazzini had done so much to introduce into the political sphere*” (it should be remembered of course that Christianity itself borrowed the idea of resurrection from pre-existing cults, such as the Greek Dionysian mysteries or, even further back, the Egyptian cult of Osiris; nonetheless it is certainly true that in the modern world and especially among the monotheistic religions, it is above all Christianity that has placed the idea of sacrifice and resurrection at the heart of its doctrine). One should not forget of course, and Mishra himself notes this elsewhere, that the 19th century was also an age of unparalleled optimism in the future and

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<sup>7</sup> Italy was divided up into a multitude of small states and principalities under the domination of various foreign powers or the Papacy; Poland was still incorporated into the Russian Empire. Rousseau actually did some consultancy for Polish nationalists, when he was invited to present recommendations for a new constitution for the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The result was the *Considerations on the Government of Poland*, in which he urged the Poles to preserve their own national dress and customs, and advised on the creation of a militia, military costumes, public holidays, and much else besides.

confidence in the idea of Progress. This is by no means a contradiction in the argument, rather it expresses the contradictory nature of the society which contained the dynamics of both decay and renewal through revolution.

## Art as critique

In the 19th century, Russia was perhaps the country where the intelligentsia felt most keenly its powerlessness in the face of a modernising industrial elite that was closely associated with an all-powerful autocratic state, yet was at the same time visibly backward compared to Britain or France, or indeed the United States. But it was precisely their powerlessness, their sense of exclusion, that made their biting and perceptive critique of capitalism and its emotional, spiritual emptiness, possible. Where Britain produced Dickens, Russia produced Dostoevsky. In 1862, Dostoevsky visited London's International Exhibition, housed in the Crystal Palace, and graphically described his sense of awe before the immense power of industrialisation sweeping all before it: "*You become aware of a colossal idea; you sense that here something has been achieved, that here there is victory and triumph. You even begin vaguely to fear something. However independent you may be, for some reason you become terrified. 'For isn't this the achievement of perfection?' you think. 'Isn't this the ultimate?' Could this in fact be the 'one fold?' Must you accept this as the final truth and forever hold your peace? It is all so solemn, triumphant, and proud that you gasp for breath*" (quoted p72). And Mishra goes on to tell us that "*Visiting Paris, Dostoyevsky caustically noted that Liberté existed only for the millionaire. The notion of Égalité, equality before the law, was a 'personal insult' to the poor exposed to French justice. As for Fraternité, it was another hoax in a society driven by the 'individualist, isolationist instinct' and the lust for private property*".

It is no accident then, that Dostoevsky became so popular not only in Europe but in countries directly subjected to the European imperial juggernaut. One writer who was deeply influenced by Dostoevsky is Lu Xun (1885-1936), generally considered the father of modern Chinese literature, who translated some of Dostoevsky's works into Chinese. That said, the case of Lu Xun should warn us not to accept Mishra's thesis uncritically. Unlike Dostoevsky, far from becoming an adept of the old reactionary forms of Chinese society, Lu Xun considered the domination of an outmoded Confucianism to be one of the main barriers to China's modernisation and independence. On the literary level his work was truly revolutionary, since there was no tradition of the novel as a form in Chinese literature, and everything had to be invented afresh right down to the language he used. Mao Zedong is said to have described Lu Xun as the author of the Revolution – while adding that, under the CCP's Stalinist regime, he would certainly have ended up in prison; he thus rendered Lu Xun a twofold homage.

Dostoevsky revolted against the cynicism of capitalist development, and especially its destruction of the ancient human ties which, however oppressive, had at least given people a sense of themselves as part of society. But lacking any forward-looking perspective, he ended up looking backwards to a largely mythical version of czarist Russia and Orthodox Christianity. Mishra's point – and it is a fundamental one – is that this experience of destruction, impotence, and atomisation is no longer confined to a few countries within the European orbit (Italy, Russia...) but has become general and worldwide. Nor is there any real perspective of improvement: the capitalist economy, while it drives vast masses off the land and into the cities, is not really capable of integrating these masses into a social fabric able to give them a sense of self-worth, of participation in the human community. This failure of the social fabric may even prove more important than directly material problems. The sense of the absurdity, isolation and revolt born of this situation has been expressed in more recent Western thought by novelists like Camus and Nabokov, and it is not the least valuable part of Mishra's work that he gives us some insight into a broader view of this existential despair, in the works of writers like the Moroccan Driss Chaïbi, or the Iranian Jalal al-e Ahmad.

## A sense of perspective

Terrorism is only the most extreme end of a spectrum of atomisation: of anger of each against all, which also finds expression in Facebook trolling and the ill-tempered gossip which anyone can observe in the workplace – and in the populism which led to the Trump and Brexit victories.

The fundamentalist Islam in whose name young men and women strap on explosive belts with no other aim than to kill themselves while killing as many of their fellow humans as possible, is not the underlying cause; it is only the specific cultural envelope through which a much more general feeling of "resentment" expresses itself. Mishra highlights what he calls "*the most illuminating coincidence of our time: the prison*

*friendship between the Oklahoma bomber Timothy McVeigh and Ramzi Ahmed Yousef who masterminded the first, failed, attack on the World Trade Center in 1993*". "Yousef said after McVeigh's execution: 'I have never [known] anyone in my life who has so similar a personality to my own as his'" (p294).

Mishra is clearly influenced by Hannah Arendt, whom he cites on several occasions, notably by her analysis of the sources of the Nazi movement in *The origins of totalitarianism*. It is worth going back to Arendt, who is a more profound thinker. While Mishra sees the sources of today's terrorism in a process which is greater in extent than it was 150 years ago, but which has remained essentially unchanged in nature since the 19th century, Arendt identifies some fundamental historical traumas in the movement of capitalist society which are critical to our understanding of the situation today. In particular, she is concerned with the terrible trauma of World War I, which destroyed confidence in capitalism's mission of progress and its ability to improve the world, and laid bare the unutterable hypocrisy of its ruling classes. This makes the experience of the 1914-18 war a real historical turning point. On their return, the "front generation" (i.e. those who had fought in the war), often felt that "*there was no escape from the daily routine of misery, meekness, frustration and resentment embellished by a fake culture of educated talk*".<sup>8</sup> This trauma of the war, whose price we continue to pay a century later, is still with us, it still calls into question the possibility of any perspective for a future beyond generalised exploitation, violence, and hypocrisy.

The other great trauma of the 20th century is the failure of the communist revolution, which began with the seizure of power by the workers' Soviets in Russia, in October 1917. Today, it is all too easy to forget the immense hope engendered by the Russian revolution amongst millions of proletarians world wide. Even after the USSR, under Stalin, became an integral part of the bloody imperialist confrontations which marked the major part of the 20th century, the mere fact of its existence continued to represent, at least in appearance, the possibility of an alternative to a dominant capitalism.

Although Mishra tells us that World War I exposed the "fragility" of liberal democracy, and dealt a blow to confidence in "Progress", he does not really follow this through. One is left feeling that the effects of "resentment" (terrorism for example) are basically "more of the same", rather than the same dynamic working itself out in a very different cultural and social context, one where the self-confidence of society as a whole has been dealt a shattering blow. Similarly, where Mishra draws a direct line between the nihilism of a Nechaev, or the anarchist "propaganda of the deed" of a Ravachol, and today's jihadists, Arendt introduces an important distinction (here she is talking about the terror tactics of totalitarian movements like the Nazis in particular): "*The pronounced activism of the totalitarian movements, their preference for terrorism over all other forms of political activity, attracted the intellectual elite and the mob alike, precisely because this terrorism was so utterly different from that of the earlier revolutionary societies. It was no longer a matter of calculated policy which saw in terrorist acts the only means to eliminate outstanding personalities who, because of their policies or position, had become symbols of oppression. What proved so attractive was that terrorism had become a kind of philosophy through which to express frustration, resentment, and blind hatred, a kind of political expressionism which used bombs to express oneself, which watched delightedly the publicity given to resounding deeds, and which was absolutely willing to pay the price of life for having succeeded in forcing the recognition of one's existence on the normal strata of society*".<sup>9</sup> This speaks to us with a terrible clarity today.

In confronting Mishra with Arendt, we see more clearly one of his major blind spots: the absence of any notion of class. He even tries to recruit Marx into his cohorts of intellectuals seething with impotence and resentment, on the grounds that Marx advocated German national unity, especially in his support for the national-democratic movement of 1848. This is clearly absurd, when we consider that the 1848 *Communist Manifesto* ends with the famous words "*Proletarians of all countries, unite!*", or that Marx's main organisational efforts in the 1860s and 70s were devoted to the International Workingmen's Association, or again that he was always viscerally opposed to the adventurism of secret societies *à la* Bakunin and to Blanquist putschism. The existence of the IWA, in both advanced countries like Britain or the rather less advanced Germany, and in still backward countries like Italy and Spain (where the anarchist component was much stronger), in itself posed a different, alternative perspective to the dynamic of capitalist society, made it

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<sup>8</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, Harvest Books, p29

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, p331



possible to envisage something beyond capitalism but growing out of it: not merely a nicer Utopia (as a matter of fact, Marx generally avoided making predictions about the future though some of his disciples were less reticent, such as William Morris with *News from Nowhere*), but “*the real movement going on beneath our eyes*” in which one could participate. Consequently, Mishra misses the important point that the heyday of the anarchist individualism and propaganda by the deed whose roots he sees, with some justice, in a sense of frustration and resentment against society in general, corresponds to the period of brutal reaction that followed the bloody repression of the Paris Commune, and which came to a close with the creation of the Second International. Arendt, in my view, is nearer the mark. In analysing the support for totalitarian movements, she distinguishes between the mob, classes, and masses. The mob represents the dregs of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie, and furnished the adventurers and mercenaries of 19th century imperialism. Classes, and in particular the proletarian class, can only exist through the medium of collective groupings or institutions which represent their interests, since it is impossible for each individual member of a class to be permanently involved in political reflection and activity. Without the existence of such collective bodies as unions and political parties, the proletarian class is dissolved into the masses, where specific class interests disappear in a mass of conflicting individual interests, where indeed the proletarian class ceases to be aware of itself as a class with its own identity and its own specific interests to defend. When we consider the hysterical crowds attending Trump rallies, it is impossible not to be reminded of Arendt’s description of the 1930s: “*A mixture of gullibility and cynicism had been an outstanding characteristic of mob mentality before it became an everyday phenomenon of masses. In an ever-changing, incomprehensible world, the masses had reached the point where they would, at the same time, believe everything and nothing, think that everything was possible and that nothing was true*”.<sup>10</sup>

The rise of “resentment” and its expressions is possible because the proletariat, which alone could pose an alternative perspective that resolves its causes, is no longer able – for the moment – to do so.

And yet, and yet... one can’t help feeling there is a problem here. Certainly, in 1930s Germany the proletariat ceased to exist as a social force capable of voicing its own independent interests, but Arendt seems to treat the dissolution of the 19th-century classes into “masses” as if it was something permanent. But where did the proletariat itself come from if not from the destruction of the peasantry and artisans by the development of industrial agriculture and manufacture, and their replacement by a new class, the class of associated labour, whose conditions of labour are specific to capitalist social relations of production? This specific industrial class is in constant mutation as techniques of production change, as old industries disappear and new ones are created. More, the association of labour itself is in constant movement to the point where today it is worldwide: logistics, supply chains, even production lines, span the planet; software developers can work on the same project whether they live in New York, Mumbai, or a French village. The proletariat can never disappear as a class until capitalism itself disappears; it is always potentially re-emergent as a social force that bears an alternative future within itself.

Here we come to another weak point in Mishra’s argument, although it is not an explicit one. It seems to me that Mishra tends to conflate under the title “urban elite”, both the true elite (the wealthy managers and billionaires of the tech and fintech industries, and high finance) with the enormous proletariat which works in these industries and creates their profits. But they are not the same, nor are their interests the same: the owners of capital are tied to social relations in which capital can be owned; those who set that capital in motion, who use it to produce, are not.

On a number of occasions, Mishra highlights the misogyny of the “resentful”, starting with Rousseau. A fear of male emasculation, of women “leaving their place”, of a loss of power to women’s influence are recurring themes, from Savarkar’s violent fantasies of Hindu dominance through raping Muslim women, to McVeigh’s railing against feminism, and, one could add, to the ludicrous hysteria over homosexual marriage or which toilet transgender people should use. This is undoubtedly the case, and more could be made of it. The existence of the feminist and LGBT movements is itself the expression of a profound change in the productive process which is without precedent in human history. In all previous societies, the sexual division of labour was the norm for both physical and cultural reasons. In its origins, capitalism maintained this separation and even enforced it, expelling women from professions like medicine where they had previously

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p382

played an important role.<sup>11</sup> Two factors which have only gained in strength in the last 50 years have undermined this separation. First, capital itself is only concerned with abstract labour and its cost so that, for capital, the sexual division of labour is not a necessary mechanism of its exploitation,<sup>12</sup> despite the fact that as a social relation capitalism remains patriarchal as well as hierarchical; second, technical progress means that there remain fewer and fewer jobs where greater male physical strength is a requirement. Not only are women more present in the workplace: men and women work side-by-side at the same jobs. Science, moreover, demonstrates that sexuality is not a binary either/or solely determined by the visible sexual organs, but a far more complex continuous spectrum of behaviour. The whole sense of what masculinity and femininity mean is called into question, it becomes more subtle, shifting, and individual.<sup>13</sup>

All this deals a severe blow to tens of millennia of unthinking machismo and male domination. It also has profound implications for the future. Any hope of going beyond capitalism will be dependent not just on women's active participation but on a transformation, within the proletariat, of the relations between the sexes and therefore of male psychology in particular, since it is above all men who will have to shed the tenacious, clinging dregs of machismo.

And so we come to the question of perspective: a perspective for the future. Mishra tells us that "*A religious or medieval society was one in which the social, political and economic order seemed unchangeable, and the poor and the oppressed attributed their suffering either to fortuitous happenings – ill luck, bad health, unjust rulers – or to the will of God. The idea that suffering could be relieved, and happiness engineered, by men radically changing the social order belongs to the eighteenth century*" (p162). Industrial capitalism is unique as a social form in that the constant revolutionising of the productive process is inherent to it. More than ever before, humans are forced to adapt, to change, to migrate, to abandon old ways of life. The single greatest migration in human history has taken place in the last 30 years, as 200 million Chinese have left their farms to find work in the new industrial metropolises.

Economic migration may be more or less a free choice (today's supposed distinction between "good" asylum seekers and "bad" economic migrants is a particularly disgusting hypocrisy). In the 19th century an Irish peasant fleeing to America from the potato famine was hardly a voluntary migrant. That said an economic migrant can at least hope to establish a new and better life in the future, has at least made a conscious choice. This is not the case for the estimated 65.6 million forcibly displaced people in the world today, of whom 22.5 million are parked in refugee camps with very little perspective of ever getting out (UNHCR figures).<sup>14</sup> Nor does the sensation of rootlessness just affect migrants. European housing estates are full of young people, second or even third generation immigrants, unable to put down emotionally satisfying roots because of unemployment and endemic racism. Communities established over many years in the industrial areas of Europe and America find their roots withering as technology and globalisation undermine the industries they depended on.

Society is invaded by a constantly imposed rootlessness which is itself a source of demoralisation whose casualties become the foot-soldiers of ISIS and the "lone wolf" shooters like McVeigh.<sup>15</sup>

Instability, dynamism, movement, all these can be desirable if we feel that we are active participants, that the movement has a perspective. Renaissance Italy was in constant upheaval as towns, states, and social classes struggled amongst themselves. Yet it is clear from its immense artistic and intellectual achievements that it offered a perspective of greater human freedom, of liberation from the dead hand of religious scholasticism, of feudal immobility and oppression. It is a terrible mistake to think that this question of perspective its

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<sup>11</sup> For a valuable discussion of this point see Sylvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*.

<sup>12</sup> Quite the reverse in fact. For capital, the exclusion of women from the waged workforce is a brake on increasing productivity. The need to bring women into the workforce to increase productivity is one of the factors driving the mechanization of home labour (washing machines, vacuum cleaners, etc)

<sup>13</sup> See in particular the chapter on "La virilité face à la Médecine" in *Histoire de la Virilité*, Vol 3, *La Virilité en Crise?*, Éditions du Seuil, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> See the chapter on "Surplus Populations" in *Capitalism's Endgame* by Mark Hayes (Old Moles Collective, 2023).

<sup>15</sup> It is striking that in the media reports, especially in the US, a white shooter like McVeigh is always "a lone wolf" while people of Muslim origin are "Islamic fundamentalists".

posed only in economic terms; in the industrialised world at least, people eat badly but they do not die of starvation. People suffer from stress, from loneliness, from a feeling of powerlessness faced with the overwhelming abstract power of “the economy”, from disgust at the superficiality of existence: what kind of society is this, where supreme happiness is measured by the possession of an iPhone X or the latest Nike trainers – which must of course be replaced next year?

## No future?

Mishra calls for “transformative thinking”, but it must be more than that: it must be radical thinking, radical in the true sense of the word, that is to say, going to the roots of the problem. Everything in Mishra's book, whether he is fully aware of it or not, is a clear, irrefutable demonstration that active terrorism, the growing danger of war, the sense of existential despair engulfing the world, and the even bigger problems like climate change that are looming over us all, cannot be solved without a radical transformation that goes to the very heart of the way in which humanity produces, and reproduces, the foundations of its own life. But the new social forms we need will not simply be invented out of nothing in the heads of great thinkers. A material transformation must begin with the material world as it is. No social form, capitalism included, has a purely negative dynamic. Capitalism contains within itself not just the seeds of its decay but also those of its transformation, its overcoming. Marx's warning is today as relevant as ever: the transformative thinking capable of developing a new perspective will not be “*based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered, by this or that would be universal reformer*”; it must “*express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes*”.<sup>16</sup>

It must be able to reveal to the proletariat what it really is, and above all what it is capable of being.

Lars Torvaldsson, April 2023

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<sup>16</sup> *Communist Manifesto*