AFTER EMPIRE: TRADITION AND THE POLITICS OF RESENTMENT

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From the Ruins of Empire: The Revolt Against the West and the Remaking of Asia by Pankaj Mishra (London and New York: Allen Lane, 2012)

In a 1948 essay, “The Unification of the World,” the historian Arnold Toynbee remarked on the strange parochialism of the West. While European technology and conquests had created a single arena of global encounters, that breakthrough ironically had disrupted Europe’s sense of its own centrality least of all. Other civilizations, in contrast, had been forced to recognize that the world’s story was larger than their own, and that they would have to adapt, largely on others’ terms.

Today Westerners often still have little sense of the crisis of confidence that wracked Asian societies during the heyday of the European empires. The aftermath of that crisis still shapes political consciousness today, among the billions whose influence is growing as the global landscape shifts. This is the theme that the Indian writer Pankaj Mishra takes up in his recent book. Mishra traces the lives and ideas of several influential Middle Eastern, South Asian, and Chinese figures of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They range from the Persian Jamal al-Din al-Afghani—inspiration to modern Islamists and Salafis—to the Chinese Liang Qichao—founder of modern Chinese nationalism. Through “physical and intellectual journeys wholly unavailable to their ancestors,” taking them as far afield as Paris, Istanbul, Moscow, Delhi, and Tokyo, they together forged an early “Asian public sphere” rooted in “a shared experience of Western domination.” Such men all were “struggling to articulate a satisfying answer to the same question: how to reconcile themselves and others to the dwindling of their civilization through internal decay and Westernization, while regaining parity and dignity in the eyes of the white rulers of the world.”

Mishra’s book does not break new ground as far as the facts go, but it is a fine and highly readable overview for anyone in the West making a first foray into understanding Asian responses to modernity. The sense that one’s civilization is unraveling around one, under pressure from the new and ill-conceived, should be familiar to many Western conservatives. Understanding how this cultural crisis played out elsewhere in

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the world, with the added insult of relative powerlessness, might lend useful perspective.

Given my long-standing sympathies for both Western and non-Western currents of traditionalism—and having advocated, including in the pages of *Modern Age*, more engagement among them—I found Mishra’s book both heartening in its scope and troubling in its approach. For while the challenges with which modernity has presented Asia deserve much greater attention among Western cultural conservatives, it is vitally important that we not misunderstand the fault lines on the global landscape.

The phrase already mentioned above, “in the eyes of the white rulers of the world,” is the crux of Mishra’s history. It is a narrative of humiliation, starting with such crushing European victories as Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798, the suppression of the Sepoy Mutiny in India in 1857, and the allied intervention to put down the Boxer Rebellion in China in 1900. In contrast to Chinese and Ottoman expansion earlier, “European imperialism would be wholly unprecedented in creating a global hierarchy of economic, physical, and cultural power.” At the peak of empire, a “small white minority” ruled the world through “cultural and racial aggression.” The rest of the story of the twentieth century was Asia’s gradual reawakening, starting with Japan’s routing of the Russian navy at Tsushima in 1905, which showed for the first time that “white men, conquerors of the world, were no longer invincible,” and accelerating with the World Wars and the unraveling of colonialism.

According to Mishra, this upsurge of Asian resistance took its political language largely from the figures in the book. That political language still resonates with the aggrieved, decades later, whether in the form of Chinese nationalism or assorted incarnations of political Islam. “It is no exaggeration,” he insists, “to say that millions, probably hundreds of millions of people in societies who have grown up with a history of subjection to Europe and America—the Chinese software engineer and the Turkish tycoon, as well as the unemployed Egyptian graduate—derive profound gratification from the prospect of humiliating their former masters and overlords.”

While the intensity of such resentment may unnerve Western readers unacquainted with it, Mishra is right to identify deep cultural crisis and response as one impetus behind Asia’s modern trajectory. One does get the impression, however, that this one dimension of response to the West obscures other rifts within these societies. Mishra briefly maps out a taxonomy of “reactionaries” who wanted to remain faithful to tradition, “moderates” who wanted to put Western techniques in service of older values, and “radicals” who wanted to break with the past altogether. But such profound differences of vision—over nothing less than the fate of civilizations—are often treated in the book as merely different ways of fumbling around the overarching question of how to “beat the West at its own game.”

To anyone genuinely sympathetic to the traditions, the trajectory followed by most Asian intellectuals who took beating the West as their central task should be deeply alarming, for most such thinkers cast off the older view of the traditions as vehicles for transmitting deeper human truths. Liang Qichao’s early Chinese nationalism presaged today’s Faustian enthusiasm for accumulating wealth and power as the basis of dignity. The May Fourth radicals of the 1920s “scorned the [Confucian] past with startling vehemence, describing it as the dead weight that held China down.” Alongside such iconoclasts, Mishra does mention alternative voices such as Liang Shuming in China,
and Mohandas Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore in India. When they pleaded for timeless spiritual truths against the relentless pursuit, along modern Western lines, of money and power, they faced backlash and contempt from those more numerous who declared that in a Darwinian world “this is no time for dreaming.” When Tagore visited China, a heckler in Hankou shouted at him, “Go back, slave from a lost country! We don’t want philosophy, we want materialism!”

Mishra passes perhaps a bit too lightly over such clashes. Yet I would insist that they deserve much fuller attention, especially from Western traditionalists. On the one hand, a reader of Modern Age might well recoil at the politics of resentment, at discarding the past so as better to lash out and “beat the West at its own game.” On the other hand, the same reader might see plenty of common ground with the Liang Shumings and Gandhis and Tagores, who represented what was most worth keeping of the old civilizations. For one thing, they had standards of judgment that transcended the crisis of the moment, while the more impressionable modernizers thrashed about and latched on to various nationalisms.

Mishra observes briefly that al-Afghani “was not a systematic thinker, and seems to have developed his ideas on the run.” One could say much the same about Liang Qichao’s odyssey away from Confucianism and into the worship of national strength. This downplaying of the existential debates over the value of tradition—Mishra casts such diverse views as merely responses to a common crisis of confidence—is bound up with how the author frames the book as a whole. Ultimately, he sits much closer to the modernizers than to the traditionalists. A narrative of racial humiliation deals in collectivities, not in permanent truths about the human condition. What the Asian enthusiasts of catching up with the West were doing harked back to the modern Zionist abandonment of faith in favor of an ethnic self-conception. If you recolor the vessel, then you can empty it and refill it with all the fevered aspirations of modernity. Civilization as a human standard of judgment gives way to Darwinian competition, with a hierarchy of peoples rather than of ends.

To be sure, Mishra is far from being a racial nationalist. By all indications, his instincts are egalitarian and emancipatory. The book’s conclusion slides into the rather familiar discourse of the Indian Left. He laments growing inequality and poverty amid Asia’s growth, the irresponsibility of the global business class, the need to transcend the nation-state to address environmental challenges, and the like. But such a laundry list of sensibilities hardly connects to robust traditions of any sort. His sympathetic gestures toward Gandhi, for example, are par for the course among much of the Indian Left, which rarely seeks to apply Gandhianism in practice. Such passing mentions of the countermodern go nowhere in Mishra’s book, because beneath the surface lurks a quasi-Marxist view of progress. The strata that most embodied the old traditions—the Chinese gentry, the Muslim clerics, some of the modern Islamist social base, and the like—are depicted as defending structures of privilege that modernity will sweep aside. Mishra’s sympathies lie far more with one or another sort of dynamic modernizer who affirms culture in form more than in substance.

Unlike some of the more Darwinian nationalists, Mishra no doubt would prefer a future without domination by anyone. The racialized take on the world is mainly about lamenting the past. And, to be fair, we should not underestimate, from a comfortable vantage point at the center of the modern world,
what it meant to be on the receiving end of Western racism over the last century and a half. Perhaps if the book dwells a bit too much on racial humiliation and responses to it, our first impulse should be to understand.

Whether it should also be our second impulse is a rather knottier question. Just as deep debates within Asia get short shrift, so are Western motives unnuanced in the book. Western treatment of Japan after World War I, and of Turkish bids for European Union membership, are seen mainly through a lens of racial contempt. This leads into dangerous territory, with Mishra’s rather accommodating account of Japanese adventures in World War II as “revenge for decades of racial humiliation,” salutary because of the liberating psychological effect on other Asians who eventually fought for independence in the late 1940s.

Double standards abound. The Darwinian flavors of nationalism that arose in Asia a century ago, and continue to hold sway in countries like China today, routinely lead in aggressive directions as soon as those espousing them have the power to act. It is in the spirit of seeing 1940s Japan as a satisfying challenger to the West that too many in the global South today end up strangely rooting for authoritarian China. Thus we have the odd experience of reading Mishra the anti-imperialist waxing poetic about China’s rise and how “Western Europe and America have no option but to pay court to it; the small commodity-producing countries of Africa and Latin America form the new periphery to China’s metropole.” Any Asian challenger, no matter how expansionist its own agenda, is at least not the West. And one conspicuously absent theme in Mishra’s book is the way in which Asian responses to global inequality have often generated other, invidious hierarchies of race. Sociologist Robert E. Washington coined the term “brown racism” to describe the contempt with which many East and South Asians view those with darker skin, especially in Africa. Mishra overlooks, for example, that Japan’s proposed “Racial Equality Clause” at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference—the rejection of which he cites as yet another example of Western chauvinism—was meant to benefit only Japanese, and not the darker subjects of the European empires.

In the end, the book suffers from such indulgence of moral inconsistencies, just as it skips too lightly over the debates about what the great traditions still had to offer. If it all comes down to how underdogs might reassert themselves, then a civilizational heritage is merely a marker of group membership. But real traditionalists like Liang Shuming and Tagore rightly counseled against simply jostling for power on the global stage. They retained older, more universal language for assessing whether modernity really served the human spirit. Sadly, the twentieth-century advocates of catching up at all costs largely drowned them out.

Ironically, Mishra ends the book by lamenting “an immense intellectual failure” among the currents of thought that descend from the responses he traces. He observes that they have not generated a “convincingly universalist” alternative to the Western economic and political model. For any committed traditionalist, this is not surprising. There is little room for universal truth seeking when a civilization is invoked only as the banner of a people asserting itself on the world stage. Indeed, such defensive nationalisms do not merely misappropriate the markers of civilization. They regress from civilization to tribalism.

Of course, the genuine traditionalists were themselves partly to blame. While there is much to respect in their diagnoses of modern ills, they often did not take seriously
enough the need to engage the world farther afield. When Liang Shuming and Tagore met briefly in Beijing, for example, they developed little rapport. The cosmopolitan high ground was yielded, by default, to the enthusiasts of postwar developmentalism and, in due course, liberal globalization.

The challenges of a century ago remain quite germane to our own time, however. Just as Asian intellectuals agonized over their place in an expanding and disorienting world, so too must Western traditionalists today meditate upon wider horizons. Many will read Mishra’s book and be put off by the dead-end defensiveness of the Asian nationalists and others to whom he devotes the bulk of his attention. But perhaps the most important lesson would be to avoid, today, much the same scenario of Western retreat from defunct empire into some tribalized version of “the little West.” To turn inward would be all too human, but it would still be a dead end.

In contrast to what Toynbee wrote in 1948, the West’s centrality will probably not last more than another generation. On the much flatter global landscape to come, those of us who lament the collapse of civilization and the neglect of timeless truths will hardly do justice to our cause if we ignore our natural allies. I would argue that for Western conservatives, those currents of genuine traditionalism in Asia—of the sort that Mishra rather dismisses as quaint distractions from modernization—are a promising place to look, however unfamiliar they might seem at first. Perhaps a conversation of the quaint could become the starting point of a traditionalist renaissance, across some of the boundaries that, on all sides, we too often still take for granted.

A BENEFICIAL CONFUSION?

Gladden J. Pappin


_Catholicism and Democracy_ is the second and final book by Emile Perreau-Saussine, whose death in 2010 cut short a life already marked by high scholarly achievement. Thanks to Richard Rex’s translation, the work of Perreau-Saussine now reaches an English-speaking audience. In it Perreau-Saussine traces the contours of Catholic political thought following the revolution of 1789 and culminating in the two Vatican Councils.

The subject of Catholic political thought has often drawn perplexed looks from the outside. Partisans of liberalism shudder at the Church’s ferocious intellectual reaction to the Revolution’s own ferocity. At least since Isaiah Berlin smeared Joseph de Maistre in 1952 with the sticky tar of fascism, that sort of antimodernism has been off-limits. Sixty years later the Catholic Church shows no signs of disinterring the _Syllabus_. But the Church’s softening toward liberalism has

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