



THE CAIRO REVIEW INTERVIEW

THE MODERNITY TRAP

Indian writer Pankaj Mishra probes imperialism's legacy, liberalism's failure, and the spreading global disorder

Lately the rise of the political right has turned some of the coolest heads into the gloomiest of prophets. Indian novelist and essayist **Pankaj Mishra** takes the long view. His new book, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*, traces violent discontent with our modern world from the European Romantics to the Islamic State's rule of terror. Mishra argues that the persistent failure of modern society to deliver on its promises—freedom, wealth, and equality—has again and again encouraged hateful and militant politics, from messianic revolutionaries in Tsarist Russia to the cultural nationalism of Germany's Nazi era. As Mishra sees it, technology and the pursuit of wealth have shattered traditional societies across the globe, setting adrift millions of people who are “uprooted from tradition but far from modernity.”

For Mishra's withering critiques of imperialism, the *Economist* called him the “heir to Edward Said.” Mishra's book *From the Ruins of Empire: The Revolt Against the West and the Remaking of Asia* declared Asia's political awakening the twentieth century's central event, and rebuked the notion that the West offers a benign one-size-fits-all model for modernity. Raised in Jhansi, in Uttar Pradesh, Mishra, 47, started as a travel writer documenting the quiet changes in India's small towns wrought by economic and technological growth. His first book, *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana: Travels in Small Town India*, was a hilarious portrait of India's upwardly mobile classes in the era of globalization. *Cairo Review* Associate Editor **Amir-Hussein Radjy** interviewed Mishra in London on December 1, 2016.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Your new book Age of Anger: A History of the Present draws parallels between the Islamic State group, Donald Trump's campaign, and hate-driven politics across the world. Where are we headed?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: It's very hard to say where it is taking us, and I think it is best to not be in the game of predictions generally. But we have seen this kind of anger before. We've seen this anger in the non-West—which for a long time was

◀ Pankaj Mishra,
London, Dec. 3, 2016.
Sanam Gharagozlou
for the *Cairo Review*

faulted for its failures to be modern, whether it's Egypt, or Iran, or India, it was faulted for its rejection of modernity, often deemed fundamentalist or backward, or irrational—but we now see that rejection in the very heart of the modern West. The point that I try to make in the book is that we have been seeing that rejection of modernity within the modern West right from that moment when modernity began to be formulated in the late eighteenth century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment, that we see first an intellectual backlash to the cosmopolitan commercial ideals of the new bourgeoisie society, but then also a political backlash that we start to see in the nineteenth century, beginning with the Germans, to modern forms of imperialism. So in a way, Napoleon's invasion of Egypt and Napoleon's invasion of Germany are kind of simultaneous events and the backlash to that, the response to that, should be seen together. The argument of the book is that the modern world as it came into being simultaneously spawned several reactions, which we have in the past called, or described as, counter-modern, anti-modern, anti-Western, anti-Enlightenment. But whatever you call them, those reactions, those angers, have always been there, have shaped politics, in many, many different countries. And now we're seeing, we're going through a phase, when that politics is being even more radically shaped by precisely that kind of anger.

CAIRO REVIEW: *So you see in the election of Trump, in Brexit, in the rejection of the global order, a sort of return to the roots and origins of European modernity?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: I see Britain and the United States—which are kind of the biggest sources of, proponents of, modernity—always upholding their experience as models for the rest of the world, setting themselves apart from the rest of the world as models, as examples to follow. But what we see now, they are rejoining the tormented history of the modern world from which they had kept themselves apart for so long. We are witnessing history as a kind of irony in motion.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What inspired Age of Anger?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: The primary inspiration was a local one, it was the election of a man who has been accused of mass murder as the prime minister of India, in May 2014. I'm talking of Narendra Modi, and that shattered every one of my political assumptions, not only about India as a democracy, but about democracy in general, about modernity. I felt that I had to go back and reexamine a whole set of ideas that I had grown up with, that I had internalized, that I had used to look at the world, and that I needed to really go back and examine them. The book came out of that, it really came out of an anguish and a despair, too. I think I should mention those because it was a time of really great torment for many of us in India, to see this man being

elected, by a huge majority, people in our own families choosing to stand with them. I'm sure people in Egypt have experienced that kind of torn loyalties within families, over the past few years especially, but it was very painful in India. So it really came out of that urge to understand why it is that so many people voted for him, despite knowing what he did, what he represents—a kind of ethno-nationalism supremacism, which believes in violence, which believes in exclusion, which is a fundamentalist, a very dangerous, political project. Despite that, people voted for him. It was out of an urge to understand that that I began to think about this book, and started to think about ways of framing the argument.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What is the importance of Buddhism to you?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: Not so much as a guide to living, but as a guide definitely to thinking. As a practitioner of Buddhism, I'm a miserable failure. I mean, I don't meditate, or at least I can't meditate beyond five seconds, and I don't actually observe many Buddhist prohibitions. But as a way of thinking, it has had a huge effect on me, one that I've not really begun to understand, but its particular epistemology, its way of looking at life as flows rather than essences, its basic anti-essentialism, and also its, I wouldn't say anti-humanism, but its non-humanism, of not seeing the human individual as the center of things, as seeing things as interdependent. All these things which modern science now tells us are true—I think it was a bit of a miracle for someone in the sixth century BC to be thinking of all those things and arriving at those conclusions without any scientific methods at his disposal. So it really opened a new way of thinking about intellectual processes, of thinking about the world, but as I've said, I haven't examined in really any great detail how it did affect me, but it certainly has been a huge influence.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Nationalist Indian leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Mahatma Gandhi rejected unfettered Anglo-American individualism, at least in some form they certainly did. Do their ideas of political community and ethical action offer a viable alternative way of living in the modern world?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: I think it's a complicated question. What they were offering is a kind of ethical community, based upon regard for the values of the community and the values for social existence, as opposed to the individual pursuit of happiness, or contentment, through accumulation of material goods and that kind of thing. That critique has been restated in various forms, including by political Islamists, who think modernity and its pursuit of material goods and its upholding of the material life, as a supreme form of existence, and its privileging of individualism, is essentially a destructive force. I think in large part that critique is a correct one, is an accurate one.

The problem lies in moving from critique to the realm of political action. That's when you find yourself replicating a whole lot of pathologies that your critique had originally identified in modernity. That, in a way, is the history of the non-Western world, that our attempts to escape are very justifiable attempts to escape that particular prison, that trap modernity has landed us in. I mean the Iranian revolution is a classic example of that. In many ways Khomeini's program was not very different from that of Gandhi, in his desire for a new ethical community built around Islam, but we know what happened there, which was that the Islamic Republic of Iran became in some ways a more repressive state than the shah of Iran's, who supposedly wanted to secularize and modernize Iran. This story has been repeated in various parts of the world. So that critique remains cogent and attractive but as to how it's going to be realized, and institutionalized, that remains an open question.

CAIRO REVIEW: *You're a fierce critic of thinkers like Niall Ferguson who say the West, through imperialism and globalization, created modern wealth and democracy. Does the rise of the East hold out the possibility of a more just world?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: Not really. But let me also say that people like Niall Ferguson should not be dignified with the term "thinkers." These are people who—and there are many of them, he's not the only one, he's a particularly egregious figure in some ways—there are many people in Anglo-America who basically have flourished on the back of immense cultural, intellectual, military power that these countries have had. [They] have managed to retail their visions—which are very much tied to political power, and military power, in both these countries—they've managed to retail them all across the world, and they've been very influential in some ways. But what they are saying can essentially be boiled down to one sentence, which is that "the West is best." There's not much thinking involved in formulations like that; there's simply crudities.

So I think to move from saying the "West is best" to the "East is best"—I don't think we've traveled very far, because the rise of the East does not, by any means, guarantee a world of greater justice or greater freedom, for anyone. I think what we've seen is the deepening of oppressive practices, institutions that for a long time we identified with imperialism. Those practices, those institutions have now proliferated within the countries that were once victims of imperialism, whether it's India or whether it's China, any number of places we can name, including large parts of West Asia, where imperialism has returned wearing indigenous masks. So I just don't think there's anything to celebrate in this so-called rise of Asia, or rise of the East, because oppression and exploitation, discrimination, all the evils that we've identified with imperialism, are still very much there, and in some cases, you could argue they are much worse.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What are the implications of the relative decline of Western dominance for the global order?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: I think the word “global order” was always sort of a misnomer, in one sense. You had one country—supported by a loose alliance of Western nations, a few other people, including Israel—exerting its great will, helped with the biggest military the world has ever seen, over the so-called weaker nations, often going to war whenever it wanted to, often for no reason whatsoever. I think it’s more accurate to define that as a kind of controlled disorder where one country, one very, very powerful country, was supposedly in charge of maintaining global order, and at the same time it was also the source of great disorder. Now what the future holds—now that the United States has become, or is becoming, more crisis prone, more self-absorbed, presumably even more isolationist—who knows? But I think we certainly are in a phase of transition, from a kind of global disorder that flowed from the dominance of one nation, to more complex forms of global disorder.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Not so long ago V.S. Naipaul called India a “wounded civilization” trying to catch up with the West. Today it is a global nuclear power. Has India moved on from the ghosts of its colonial past?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: No country can really move on in that sense. It’s still obsessed with catching up with the West, beating it at its own game. So even though colonialism might have disappeared as a political and military fact, the fact is that it has left a whole lot of colonized minds behind it. [They] can only seek redemption through this very retrograde endeavor of beating the West, surpassing the West, becoming a bigger power, militarily, acquiring nuclear bombs, having a faster growth rate. It’s a kind of march of fantasy that many in the Indian elite have become victims of. So I don’t really derive much hope from this kind of strength and this kind of power.

CAIRO REVIEW: *How is India changing under Modi?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: Pretty dramatically, and I think that the consensus is pretty much for the worse. The ideological movement that he leads is remaking the country, really with great speed, occupying the state, colonizing the state, filling its institutions with loyalists—every institution, from military to cultural, to head of the film, television training institute, wherever you look there are loyalists and Hindu nationalists in place, so in a way it is a kind of takeover that the Muslim Brotherhood can only dream of. So obviously the country’s culture, shared national culture, everything has been altered, in just two years. [That] is not to say these changes had not been in the making for awhile, but I think the arrival of Modi himself has accelerated that, so you see a much more hardline Hindu nationalism, or Hindu supremacism, which is

very belligerent, very harsh in its postures towards Pakistan, towards Indian Muslims, towards Kashmiris, towards minorities too, towards liberals—towards anyone they can identify as rootless cosmopolitans, so the same kind of pathologies we saw in Europe in the nineteenth century are flourishing in India right now. And economic growth remains jobless, remains highly uneven, and as long as it does, the ruling classes are going to find new enemies to identify, to persecute, and that’s what they’ve been doing, so you see all the classic signs of incipient fascism in the country today.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Modi’s government has charged student leaders and academics who have sought to protect freedom of speech and minorities with “anti-nationalism.” Can the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party’s Hindu nationalism coexist with the founding liberal, secular ideals of post-independence India?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: There’s no question of coexistence because those ideas are pretty much dead, and the institutions and the individuals who might have sustained those ideas have been essentially either shut down or destroyed. It’s very hard to imagine a resurgence of social democratic or liberal democratic energies in the country today. And this may be a very bleak view, but I really don’t see any signs of hope right now.

CAIRO REVIEW: *When did those ideals cease to function?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: They were being weakened all this time, they were weakened not actually by the Hindu nationalist government.

CAIRO REVIEW: *During Indira Gandhi’s rule?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: I think historically, chronologically, there’s an argument to be made that she started, she inaugurated this long process of decline, but I think that it’s perhaps too easy. There was always, to use a kind of slang word, a kind of “design flaw” in the way Indian democracy, or the Indian nation-state was created, after an incredibly bloody partition in which millions of people were rendered homeless, and countless people lost their lives or were raped or tortured. So it was a trauma that essentially, under whose sign, India came into being, and I think we haven’t actually in a way—it became very clear two years ago—that we have not been able to overcome that trauma, and perhaps never will, or will never be able to recover from it.

Now many other local factors are in play here. The forces of globalization, the loss of legitimacy by the previous ruling regime, which was very corrupt, and very inefficient, very inept, the rise of a class of Hindus, who were getting more affluent materially, and wanted a bigger place for themselves both locally and internationally. There are many, many factors in play here, but I think the assault on the ideals of liberalism and democracy, which were created and upheld by a tiny minority of very

well-educated Indians, that has been under way for awhile, and it's not particular institutions or individuals, but they have been kind of ground, finely ground, by the various forces working on them.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Modi, as governor of Gujarat, neglected to stop the massacre of Muslims in the 2002 riots, yet afterwards his political position was only stronger. Has the BJP used anti-Muslim violence to further its rise?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: It's always done that. One certain way is to identify the enemy, which is the Muslim, and to say this is the person undermining the unity of India, undermining our value systems, this is the true danger, also allied with various dark forces of terrorism internationally. So it's always used these metaphors to advance its political ambitions, and they've done so more dramatically in the last few years.

The reason why Modi won despite that taint of Gujarat, I think it's the same reason why Trump won despite everything he said—everything that, for any other political figure, would have been destructive of his chances. The time had come for the voters, for the masses, to express their rejection, to move away from what you and I think of as everyday ordinary morality. I think what we're seeing today on a large scale is a kind of breakdown of ethical constraints of older ideas of morality [which held] that if someone is a serial groper, or boasts openly about rape, or is a brazenly racist figure, then you don't actually vote for him. All those constraints have been thrown out in the last few years, but we saw that process first in India.

CAIRO REVIEW: *That's a very big sort of accusation to make. What was the cause of this move away from older ideals of morality?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: It's a very complex process, which cannot be easily summarized.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Economic disintegration?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: I think what we've seen is the decline of older models of politics and solidarity, and the rise of a kind of amoral individualism, [with] whatever means are available to you in the pursuit of success, in the pursuit of self-advancement; morality does not enter the picture in thinking of issues like justice, thinking of gender equality, which is what I grew up with, those collective ideals, which we knew we had to struggle for collectively. There's been a massive shift to thinking of yourself as an individual without any particular history, without any particular sense of morality. As an individual you have to go forward, go forth into the world and make your own reality, and I think people like Trump and Modi are very much the beneficiaries of that kind of mentality, where history does not matter, structural injustices, structural inequalities don't matter, violence does not matter, verbal violence does not matter.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What is the impact of renewed violence in Kashmir on Indian domestic politics?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: Kashmir, and generally violence against Muslims, again, is used to define the national community. So, this is the Hindu people, as it were, who are facing all kinds of challenges both at home and abroad, and here are this bunch of traitors who need to be beaten up really badly, and that sentiment, not just amplified by politicians, but media over the past few months, that we have to hit them hard, so that they don't rise again. A bit like the Rodney King video—a person rising and he's being beaten down again by the police—that was the lynch mob mentality manifest across TV channels and also across the print media in India.

CAIRO REVIEW: *There was significant popular support for the government crackdown against separatists.*

PANKAJ MISHRA: Very much so, and also from the media.

CAIRO REVIEW: *President Obama has looked to India as a regional counterweight against China. How do you see India's relationship with an expanding China?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: Well, all these calculations have been essentially thrown out with the arrival of Trump, who seems to have no interest in pursuing Obama's policies anywhere, whether domestically or internationally. Who knows what stance he might take towards India, towards China, or towards Asia, whether he might reverse the so-called pivot to Asia? At this point all our assumptions are really on hold. We have to wait and see what happens, and I don't think we'll ever get a coherent policy statement from this fellow.

CAIRO REVIEW: *I'm sure you saw the transcript from his first phone call with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif—that he was doing “amazing things” in Pakistan, that he was a “terrific guy.”*

PANKAJ MISHRA: Seriously! Boosterish business talk basically. They are both businessmen so I'm sure they'll get along.

CAIRO REVIEW: *How do you explain the election of Donald Trump?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: I think the same way I explain the election of Modi or Brexit here, which is that a great sense of anger, resentment, simmering over many years, which was systematically disregarded by the media, by politicians, mainstream politicians—and he was just there, just at the right moment, to harvest this bit of fruit and come into power. There were a whole lot of people who were extremely frustrated by their failure to share in the bonanza of global capitalism, and they saw many others

benefiting from it, becoming incredibly rich. At the same time they felt their lives being drained of meaning, not just by income inequality, but by the fact that they had to constantly deal with change, with upsetting change. Whether through jobs disappearing, or through immigration, the world was moving too fast, and it turns out many, many people were unhappy with this, and their rejection of this—the beneficiaries were these two figures, and there have been many others around the world.

CAIRO REVIEW: *There may be Marine Le Pen in the Élysée Palace?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: Yes, she may be next.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Is liberal democracy in terminal decline?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: Well, liberal democracy was always a bit of a sham, to be honest. It depended on—first of all, it always concealed the fact that a whole lot of violence had gone into its making, and a whole lot of violence went into preserving it, and that violence was truly universal. The countries, the big countries, where liberal democracy flourished were the countries, at the same time, engaged in simultaneous wars.

So if now it's in decline, it's because liberal democracy has failed to deliver the goods, even in its own heartlands, let alone in India, in Egypt, where its benefits were much doubted by the natives. So I think it faces a crisis of legitimacy that I don't know how it would recover from. It faced a similar crisis back in the 1930s. What really saved it was the fact that its opponents were so monstrous that liberalism started to look attractive in comparison to Stalinism and Nazism, but we know that there was a destructive war in between, before liberalism could be rehabilitated.

CAIRO REVIEW: *You speak of resentment. Why does the right dominate this resentment, this anger? Why not the left?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: Well, there is no left. These questions get posed in these kind of familiar oppositions of left and right, but there's only been the right for a very long time. There's been no left. Certainly in Western Europe, certainly in India, there's been no left in my lifetime, there's only been a right with different names for different parties. I think very specifically if you're talking about Western Europe and the United States, the so-called left was trying to reinvent itself as centrists, which basically meant appropriating the policies of the right. So there hasn't been a left for a long time. So in a way, the extreme right, in this instance, the far right, was always extremely well placed to benefit from the failures of the right's programs. The left basically did not exist until Bernie Sanders arrived, and that was too little. There just wasn't enough time for him to do much.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Margaret Thatcher, in the 1990s, was asked about her greatest achievement, and she said, “Mr. Tony Blair.”*

PANKAJ MISHRA: I think that’s absolutely right. I think the so-called social democratic left, whether it’s the Labour Party here or the Democratic Party in America, they were obscenely keen to basically retool themselves in the image of their so-called rightwing opponents. If you look at what Bill Clinton did, his impact on especially the African-American community—much, much worse than any Republican president. What he did to accentuate inequality, much worse than any other Republican president in the 1980s or afterwards.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What policies do you have in mind?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: The incarceration policy, for one, which multiplied the number of African-Americans in prison—the tough-on-crime policy. The deregulation that he inaugurated, of what had been in place since the New Deal, all those sort of loosening, privatization, deregulation, all these processes whose victims voted against Hillary Clinton were set in motion by her husband. So there is a kind of karmic justice that Hillary Clinton should be defeated by the very forces that her husband unleashed in the 1990s.

CAIRO REVIEW: *How do you explain the role religion is playing in politics today, across geographical borders?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: Well, I don’t know whether religion can be seen as something separate from the realm of politics. I don’t believe in this particular distinction between religion and politics. Religion has always been present in politics. This is an arbitrary distinction to begin with. In the United States we’ve always seen religion playing a vital role in consolidating, in mobilizing large numbers of people, not just during elections but during the whole year.

In Europe, religion has always been invisibly present in the structures of secular society, in the way when the French presidential candidate speaks now of France as a “daughter of Christianity,” he is uttering completely obvious truths. It may seem blasphemous to people who think France is the capital of secularism, but I think he’s actually being more accurate. Christianity manifests itself in practically every national institution. Here, too, in this country. So it’s never been separate. These artificial distinctions were made to conceptualize Islam as this great “other” of the West, that Islam suffers from all these problems that we in the West don’t suffer from, that it doesn’t observe the great separation between religion and politics. But, you know, these were kind of ambitious intellectual attempts that never really succeeded.

CAIRO REVIEW: *But certainly, in the Middle East, it's clear that whatever you want to call it, Islamism or political Islam has enjoyed a resurgence and an enormous power it simply did not have in the mid-twentieth century. So specifically, why has religion suddenly acquired such an overtly powerful role?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: I think religion is one of those sort of centers, one of those constructions like race or like class, around which you can mobilize people. So in countries where trade unions are more or less absent, there are no intermediate institutions. Class struggle is nonexistent, gender solidarity is nonexistent—there are certainly no institutions to make them effective in the political arena. Not surprisingly in so many of these countries, people invoke religion, they invoke Islam, and say, “Okay we’re going to organize around Islam.” And Islam so happens to have a whole lot of ideals about social justice that have become hugely relevant today in times of great inequalities. So it already has a program, you don’t have to push too much of your agenda on it. Islam within its own traditions offers a kind of belief in solidarity, brotherhood, and justice, so it’s not surprising at all that it has become a site of resistance against what is perceived as secular forms of injustice, modern forms of oppression.

CAIRO REVIEW: *You said before, secular ideals in India had always been, anyway, upheld by a very small group of Indians. That gets back to the point of these liberal ideals being upheld in Egypt, in Iran, by a quasi-foreign elite.*

PANKAJ MISHRA: And in the case of Iran, imposed brutally upon the rest of the population, which caused a great backlash in the Islamic Revolution. So we also have to understand that modernization, or liberal modernity, in these places, was something imposed by a tiny minority through extremely painful, traumatic experiments—getting all these people from the villages into the cities, not offering them jobs, not offering them decent places to live in, in Iran for instance. In Cairo, in Egypt the process happened differently, but the radical restructuring of people’s lives, people’s economies by this technocratic, liberal, cosmopolitan elite—in many cases Western-educated, or people educated in Western-style institutions—lording it over the rest, telling them that we are secular, we are liberal, we are superior to you, so we therefore have this great authority to radically reorder your lives. What we’ve been seeing over the past fifty or sixty years is the rejection of those claims, and a counter-claim that you guys are frauds, that all you want is to feather your own nest, and in many cases, that retort is devastatingly accurate. This is not to condone the religious fanatics that made those claims, but we have to acknowledge that those claims are also true, to a large extent.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Fidel Castro gave Cuba independence at the cost of liberty, like Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt. Is the choice, in the global south, between national development and individual rights?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: Well, it's a very harsh choice, and one has to remember it has been imposed by historical circumstances, that countries like Cuba, Egypt, many countries one could name in that category—Cuba more so because Cuba was actually next-door neighbors to the most powerful country in the world, which did everything in its power to strangle, to stifle the country's economy, and succeeded, I think. In that context, survival was seen as an achievement in itself, and the survival of the revolution, the survival of the nation, that became the end to which were sacrificed individual rights, individual liberties. One can see this as almost inevitable, that there was no way Cuba was going to be a free society, in that kind of geopolitical situation. So the tragedy of Cuba under Castro was inevitable, there was no way that country was going to be anything other than what it was, given the historical cards it held, given the very few chances and advantages it had.

CAIRO REVIEW: *How do you explain the failure of the Arab Spring?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: First of all, the spring itself—if I may be so bold—the actual political aspects of it were exaggerated and dramatized. The way we came to perceive it was deeply, deeply mediated. So our sense of it, our sense of the people's uprising spawned a whole lot of unrealistic expectations about the arrival of democracy, and we simply did not reckon with the deeply entrenched structural problems of these countries, not just politically but their economies, how dependent they had become, how corrupt, and how hollowed out they had become, and that for a long time their fragmentation and their deep inner fractures were concealed by brutal dictators, and that once they were born, those fractures would be visible, those divisions would become violent. So the language of emancipation, which is a kind of modern language par excellence—that is modernity is about emancipation, so it's great, people are liberating themselves from the dictator, having a revolution of their own—that was the lens through which we saw this, but we never really took into account the fact that revolution and that kind of regime change set off a whole series of processes which take many, many years, if not decades, to resolve. If you look at France, the sort of motherland of revolution, think of how long it took France—the better part of a century—to become a stable, not even liberal democratic, but just a stable nation-state. Liberal democracy did not come to France really until after 1945. But if you look at the nineteenth century, how many revolutions, and counter-revolutions, coup attempts, wars, imperialism, one imposture after another, anti-Semitism—one thing after another—so this notion that revolution leads to any kind of stable democratic government was a fantasy in itself.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Are public intellectuals making any difference in today's local or global politics?*

PANKAJ MISHRA: Well, I think, as someone who is often identified as a public intellectual, I've come to be extremely wary of that term, and of the people who are also identified as public intellectuals. I think we need to have a more humble, modest sense of what the public intellectual is capable of. Public intellectualism too often shades into advocacy of a certain kind, affiliations with powerful people, and that is the end of any kind of intellectualism. I think an intellectual, at least the way I see it, always swims against the current. Once you start swimming with the current, it's really over. You're simply there to justify whatever power does, and I'm afraid there are obviously quite a lot of exceptions, but most of the people we identify as public intellectuals are there to provide elaborate intellectual justifications for what power does. So we have to cultivate a degree of skepticism and irony towards this historical figure.