

Reviews

From the ruins of empire: the revolt against the West and the remaking of Asia

By Pankaj Mishra. London: Allen Lane, 2012. Pp. 368. Hardback £20.00, ISBN 978-1-8461-4478-3; paperback £11.99, ISBN 978-0-2419-5466-9.

Reviewed by Cemil Aydin
University of North Carolina, USA
E-mail: caydin@email.unc.edu

doi:10.1017/S1740022813000119

Pankaj Mishra's book on the critiques of Eurocentric imperial world order focuses on the ideas about imperialism, empire, reform, religion, civilization, progress, and nationalism of three influential intellectuals from western, southern, and eastern parts of the broader Asian continent. The first, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838–97), became a symbol of Pan-Islamic networking and thought owing to his simultaneous connections to the intellectual circles of Iran, Afghanistan, India, Moscow, Egypt, and Ottoman Turkey. The second, Liang Qichao (1873–1929), represented all the complexities of reform, renovation, and transition in China from the late Qing to the early Republican period. The third, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), was perhaps the first global literary celebrity from the Asian continent, well known and read throughout the world, especially after he received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913. By presenting impressively well-written intellectual biographies of these three figures from non-Western world, with rich detail of their critiques of the existing world order as well as their alternative visions, Pankaj Mishra invites his readers to reconsider these universal voices, often relegated to a marginal reactive position, in our current reflection on the crisis of the contemporary world order.

Scholars of global history will welcome this book, as Pankaj Mishra manages to synthesize the methodological innovations and new insights of scholarship of modern world history and then

convert them into an easily readable book for a general audience. To begin with, Mishra's ability to put these three figures next to each other and tell his readers a story full not only of parallel struggles and critiques but also of shared experiences, entanglements, and impact should be congratulated. Owing to al-Afghani's reputation as a Pan-Islamic radical, Tagore's image as a cosmopolitan poet, and Liang Qichao's early commitments in reviving a seemingly obsolete Chinese empire, these three figures have not often been viewed in relation to each other. While aware of the major differences in their education, outlook, and political goals, Mishra shows amazing global linkages and draws important lessons from their critiques of Eurocentric modernity and the racial foundations of Western hegemony, their interest in pan-nationalist projects, their cosmopolitanism, and their disappointments with both empires and nationalist movements.

Mishra's focus on the individual intellectual biography of three prominent figures makes sense in that the readers are presented with a rich and complex story that in none of these cases fits into any broad narratives of modernization, empire, nationalism, or even the simplistic civilizational narrative of Asia against the West. Based on this vivid depiction, the book is excellent at showing that there is more to the transition from the mid-nineteenth-century imperial world to the mid-twentieth-century international order composed of sovereign nation-states than the story of the rise of nationalism against evil imperialism. Mishra also helps his readers to see modern international and intellectual history beyond the duality of modernization and development theory on the one hand, and anti-colonial nationalism on the other hand.

In fact, none of the three intellectuals in focus can be reduced to the story of subaltern fulfilment of the Eurocentric values of liberation and national rights. In their pursuit of dignity and the liberation of their societies on the basis of an eclectic epistemology, they selectively refashioned Eurocentric concepts and ideas,

and, in that process, they appropriated the notions of the rise of the West and the decline of the East, and the orientalist notions of the spiritual East versus the materialist West. Thus, they argued for the awakening of Asia, as if Asians were sleeping. Yet, despite these epistemological concessions, they managed to turn the discourse of civilization, which had been a tool of imperialism, into a tool of decolonization and anti-colonial solidarity. Meanwhile, al-Afghani, Tagore, and Liang Qichao all managed to bring something extra to the conversation on global problems and challenges, things that cannot be traced back to European intellectual world.

There is a major theme in this book that contemporary scholars of global history might like Pankaj Mishra to cover in a sequel to this fine book, namely the question of empires in the long nineteenth century. Mishra is perhaps responding to the nostalgia about and scholarly praise for the virtues and achievements of European empires, especially the British empire. Yet there is also a new global history literature on empires in world history that he could have engaged more forcefully. As seen in Fred Cooper and Jane Burbank's recent *Empires in world history* (Princeton, 2010) there have always been empires in world history, and, in this context, it is important to underline what was unique about the short-lived yet transformative Western imperial hegemony in a globalizing world from the 1870s to the 1920s. Stories of Al-Afghani, Tagore, and Liang Qichao partly answer this question as they became extremely preoccupied with the intellectual foundations of the new European imperial hegemony with its hierarchies of races, religions, and civilizations. During their intellectual decolonization efforts, however, al-Afghani or Lian Qichao still maintained an alternative imperial vision. One could write more about the relationship between al-Afghani and the Ottoman empire, in whose capital he spent much time living as a guest of Sultan Abdulhamid II. For the anti-colonial and pan-Islamic intellectuals of South Asia and Central Asia, the Ottoman Caliphate in Istanbul and the Ottoman empire itself emerges as a symbol of Muslim dignity and modernity at the same time. Why was it that, for both al-Afghani and Liang Qichao, the end of the Ottoman and Qing empires were neither inevitable nor desirable?

Pankaj Mishra reminds us that we need to reflect on the very weak foundations of modern world order: many key decisions were taken around the time of the First World War and after the Second World War to tackle the crisis of empire and respond to the power of anti-colonial demands, but without

much reflection or conversation. This book provides good background reading for a better and necessarily global conversation on the nature of modern international order. The transformation of the world economy in recent decades also helps us overcome one of the major obstacles to a true dialogue on the shared global issues of humanity, namely the obsolete language of essential civilizational differences, posing a spiritual East against a material West. Despite all the theoretical intervention on this topic since Edward Said's *Orientalism*, and despite the common-sense denial of this logic by anyone who visits Tokyo, Shanghai, Mumbai, or Istanbul, the belief in civilizational distinction is alive, especially in literature on social sciences and journalism. Such language is especially dominant in the new discussions on the 'Muslim question', from the War on Terror to the policy challenges of the Arab Spring. Pankaj Mishra does a great service in dispelling this continuing obsession with the Muslim peril by showing the global synchronicity and modern origins of Pan-Islamic ideas with comparable intellectual developments in non-Muslim colonized societies. As a truly global intellectual, he makes a powerful intervention with a brilliant move to connect the fear of the Muslim question with questions concerning China and India, and demonstrates that we need a new non-Eurocentric intellectual and international history if we want to have a reasonable conversation about our current global challenges.

Shattering empires: the clash and collapse of the Ottoman and Russian empires, 1908–1918

By Michael Reynolds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. xiv+303. 25 b/w illustrations, 5 maps. Hardback £61.00, ISBN 978-0-521-19553-9; paperback £20.99, ISBN 978-0-521-14916-7.

Reviewed by Virginia H. Aksan
McMaster University, Canada
E-mail: vaksan@mcmaster.ca

doi:10.1017/S1740022813000120

In two years, the world will mark the centenary of the beginning of the First World War, the war to end all wars, which is the subject of Michael Reynolds' lucid and dispassionate work *Shattering empires*. The author is clearly fluent in a number of fields. The first is the better-known and much-published