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'From the Ruins of Empire'

By Mark Mazower

An engaging account of how intellectuals in Asia and the Middle East responded to European imperialism



Students surround Bengali poet and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, 1929

From the Ruins of Empire: The Revolt Against the West and the Remaking of Asia, by Pankaj Mishra, *Allen Lane*, RRP£20, 368 pages

Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," wrote Rudyard Kipling in 1889. This was nothing if not wishful thinking, and no one knew it better than the poet of the imperial Raj himself: indeed, that same year Kipling visited Hong Kong and bemoaned the likely impact of bringing railways and newspapers to China. "What," he warned, "will happen when China really wakes up?"

With the British empire at the zenith of its power, it was hardly an immediate worry. The Chinese might pride themselves on avoiding the

fate of a “lost country” such as India, with its viceroys and its foreign empress, but the Qing dynasty was losing its grip and only a few years later the nationalist Boxer rebellion would be brutally crushed by a western expeditionary force, precipitating the crisis from which China did not emerge for half a century.

Yet very gradually, the global balance was starting to tilt in the other direction. When Japan annihilated much of the Russian navy in the Tsushima Strait in May 1905, it announced to the world the rise of the first non-western power in modern times. The first world war precipitated much soul-searching in Europe and Oswald Spengler’s gloom-laden *The Decline of the West* caught the mood of Weimarian pessimism. Reporting from the Greco-Turkish frontlines in Anatolia, the historian Arnold Toynbee discerned the glimmering of a new power in the east, and the gradual waning of that “shadow upon the rest of humanity [which] is cast by western civilisation”. As Greece’s bid for empire was rebuffed by the Turkish nationalist army led by Mustafa Kemal (later Atatürk), Toynbee saw the global implications: Europe, he warned, could no longer afford its traditional indifference to the east and would now have to come to terms with the existence of other civilisations.

His words were not immediately heeded, and some would say that the west still has a way to go to accept other cultural and intellectual traditions as real equals. No doubt the waning of its economic predominance and the ongoing Chinese awakening that Kipling foresaw will accelerate the process. This lively and intelligent book by Pankaj Mishra, an Indian writer whose previous works have explored the contemporary interweaving of European and Asian thought and faiths, can only help too. *From the Ruins of Empire* offers an engaging account of how, at the apogee of European global hegemony, Arab, Persian, Indian, Chinese and Japanese intellectuals responded to the intrusion of colonisers, diplomats and merchants. Dreaming of resistance and re-assertion, they advocated solidarity – sometimes of Muslims, sometimes of Asians – and they felt deep humiliation at their helplessness in the face of the global imbalance of power. The idea that what was happening was some vast clash between the forces of western modernity and eastern tradition has long underpinned a rather benign and often frankly celebratory view of “the expansion of Europe”. Mishra accepts the paradigm but there is nothing very positive about the story as seen through the eyes of its victims and critics.

The first such thinker to be introduced is the mysterious figure of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, who was born in a village in north-west Persia in 1838 and who died in Istanbul in 1897. A Shia who passed himself off as a Sunni Muslim of Afghan origins, his wanderings – between



Persia, Afghanistan and the Raj, the Ottoman lands, Egypt and Russia – gave him an acute appreciation of Islam's possibilities as an anti-western political force. When Whitehall officials spent sleepless nights worrying about the pan-Islamic threat to the Raj, Egypt and the Sudan, this was in no small part thanks to Afghani and those he inspired. Later acolytes included pre-first world war Egyptian nationalists, and key figures in the interwar Arab and Indian movement to restore the Caliphate, a doomed attempt to forge political unity among Muslims after the collapse of the Ottoman dynasty. Nor was he forgotten by the postwar émigré Iranian intellectuals who spent their days in Left Bank cafés plotting the downfall of the shah.

Afghani was old enough to have been born into the old ways but sharp enough to see that without an overhaul of education to take account of modern science, those traditions would perish. He belonged to the first generation of journalists in Arabic, and understood the power of the printed word: his debate with French historian Ernest Renan over the relationship between Islam and modernity was a dramatic encounter in which Renan came off second best. But like some of the other figures Mishra revives for us, Afghani died a disillusioned man, disappointed in turn by the rulers of Afghanistan, Persia and the Ottoman empire.

Though born a generation later in 1873, the Chinese reformer Liang Qichao offers a kind of parallel life, and not only in his frustrations. Like Afghani, Liang understood the power of the press and wielded the pen to stunning effect, teaching (among others) the young Mao Zedong that political reform was imperative to shore up the state and save the nation. And like Afghani, Liang knew the west far better than the west knew him: he travelled widely across the US and his experience of the acute inequalities of wealth and the racism of the Gilded Age influenced his vision for China.

A disparate bunch, Mishra's preferred thinkers are wanderers, anti-colonial cosmopolitans who dream of new alliances of peoples and who warn of western materialism and the need to preserve spirituality and faith across borders. When he turns to China, we inevitably get a sense of the allure of anti-colonial nationalism, of the pull of western socialism and the dream of material progress. But there is little space for the many socialists, theosophists, feminists and rationalists who flourished, above all in the Raj, and the book does not really try to explain the sudden turn to socialism among Arab intellectuals between the two world wars. In fact, what it offers is in some ways a glimpse of paths not taken. Those endless invocations of eastern spirituality – exemplified in the vatic pronouncements of the Bengali poet and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, who also looms large in this book – ring oddly now. Today's political and business elites in Asia and the Middle East compete for western capital. Boutiques and billionaires in Mumbai, Prada and Louis Vuitton in Beijing,

let us not even mention Dubai: all this was just about Tagore's vision of hell – the ultimate triumph of the west's desire for stuff – but it has won out over the contemplative life without much of a struggle.

Tagore, for one, was more a figure of his time than Mishra allows. Thinking big, his generation spoke as readily about "civilisations" as western contemporaries such as Spengler and Toynbee did. Their pronouncements sometimes got at deep truths but often teetered on the edge of vacuity, and the way both Tagore and Toynbee were embraced between the two world wars as scholar-seers, unifiers of a divided world, now seems distinctly overblown. How far Mishra's easterners owed their talk of civilisational decline and resurgence, of spirit versus matter, to the European Orientalists who were both their teachers and their opponents is an intriguing question. But their indebtedness to the latter may explain why they often emerge as much more effective critics of western hypocrisy and shortcomings than they do as guides to the byways of their own traditions.

Was there even an "east" at all? How much – apart from the pain of being condescended to, ruled and humiliated in countless ways by Europeans and Americans – did the very different faiths, languages and historical communities of the lands between the Mediterranean and the Pacific really share? The truth is that cosmopolitans – whether anti-colonial or communist – were generally let down by the 20th century and the rapid spread of nationalism across the colonial world in the hands of technocrats, military men and party officials. By the 1930s, at the latest, pan-Islamism and pan-Arabism were both dead as political projects; neither Nasser nor (much later) al-Qaeda had any chance of reviving them. As for pan-Asianism, it was pretty much dealt a deathblow once the Japanese turned it into an excuse for their own version of imperialism.

Mishra praises the non-aligned movement and, as an effort of developing countries to stand against the cold war, it was impressive. But it was not the beginning of any kind of movement of anti-colonial solidarity. The minute the empires collapsed, India and China began their tussle for regional leadership, profiting from Japan's defeat. Today's Asia strikingly lacks any serious impetus to political integration. In the end, it was Atatürk's Turkey – forging a proud independence as a national state – that proved the most potent model.

Yet a deeper truth in Mishra's book remains all too pertinent today. We live in an age in which the so-called international community, driven by the west's ethical concerns, no longer respects the sanctity of state sovereignty or the inviolability of borders, and intervenes more readily on humanitarian grounds than at any time in the past century. Western politicians lecture the Turks on genocide recognition, and scold the Chinese for

their human rights abuses. Perhaps this book will help supplement their sense of moral righteousness with a little historical understanding. For the memory of European imperialism remains a live political factor everywhere from Casablanca to Jakarta, and whether one is talking nuclear power with Tehran or the future of the renminbi with the Chinese, contemporary diplomacy will fail if it does not take this into account. Of course, as the example of Robert Mugabe suggests, developing-world elites may have their own very self-serving reasons to harp on about the evils of empire; nevertheless, such rhetoric resonates. No one likes being told what to do, and empire was all about that. As a record of what some of the most penetrating commentators at the sharp end thought of western values and western pretensions, *From the Ruins of Empire* retains the power to instruct and even to shock. It provides us with an exciting glimpse of the vast and still largely unexplored terrain of anti-colonial thought that shaped so much of the post-western world in which we now live.

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