In an age of resentment?

‘Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through church and state, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality.’

– Henry David Thoreau, Walden (1854)*

Alexis de Tocqueville in Democracy in America (1840) said that ‘to live in freedom, one must grow used to a life full of agitation, change and danger’; in other words: one may move quickly from ‘unlimited freedom’ to a ‘craving for unlimited despotism’.

With the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Western model of ‘modernization’ embedded in the concept of ‘free-market capitalism’ triumphed across the world. Free-market capitalism, an economic system rooted in liberal ideas of individualized rationality (driven by an ‘autonomous rights-bearing’ individual’s self-interest-maximizing behaviour) as well as in the concept of ‘free’ trade and an alluring faith in markets as self-equilibrating forces, transformed in the 1990s to a religion of universal progress across most of Asia, Africa and Latin America. After the 9/11 attack on the US, Francis Fukuyama wrote in a column that ‘modernity is a very powerful freight train that will not be derailed by recent events, however painful and unprecedented... Democracy and free markets will continue to expand over time as the dominant organizing principles for much of the world’.


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However, in today’s times of ISIS expansion, Brexit, Trump’s Presidency, rise of far-right extremist groups and other similar contemporary politico-economic developments, it seems that ‘modernization’ and ‘modernity’, driven by forces of democratization and free-market based capitalistic systems ultimately led to what George Santayana (a Spanish-American author) calls as an inciting ‘lava-wave of primitive blindness and violence’. One may appositely ask, to what extent was a blind belief in capitalistic systems, rooted in the transformative (cap)abilities of such ‘rational’ forces of ‘modernity’, responsible for our age of ‘nihilistic violence’ and resentment?; resentment and violence that accompanied the implosion of nation states in the Middle East and is still visible in the rise of far-right movements across the world. A complex question indeed, and one that Pankaj Mishra seeks to unravel in his most recent book *Age of Anger*.

*Age of Anger* aims to explain historical trends of ‘resentment’ (literally defined as a ‘psychological state resulting from suppressed feelings of envy and hatred which cannot be satisfied’) that prevailed in 18th and 19th century Europe and North America and is now visible in our age of endlessly proliferating ‘mimetic desire…’. In a world where ‘the modern promise of equality collides with massive disparities of power, education, status and property ownership’, the backlash and discontentment created by globalization- isn’t a new phenomenon; rather, we can see it as the product of an essentially cyclical, historically inevitable phenomenon. The widespread emotions of racism, misogyny, rage, nihilistic violence, cynicism, ‘negative solidarity’ (a term coined by Hannah Arendt) we experience today are reflected in the demagoguery prevalent both in geo-political and day to day discourse visible across public platforms--including digital and social media networks. A global reality, once described by Nietzsche as ‘a whole tremulous realm of subterranean revenge, inexhaustible and insatiable in outbursts’.

**Revisiting ‘Resentment’**

The feeling of resentment is spreading like a virus across our information age’s social media. Why? Not because of some ideological battle between the East-West or part of a North-South divide, but rather largely because of a mistaken assumption often made by ‘liberal’ scholars, politicians and policymakers in their argument for ‘modernization’ along capitalistic lines: in seeing human identity as fixed and singular, ignoring how frequently it tends to be ‘manifold and self-conflicting’ and is characterized by contradictory notions of ‘selfhood’.

The idea of liberalism evolved in 18th and 19th century Europe and North America promoted values of individual freedom and liberty in an absolute sense, associating its pursuit with the attainment of each and everyone’s overall well-being. In classical economics (and other social
sciences) too, individual development essentially lied in the acquisition of private property rights, freedom to trade and be mobile, access to capital and development of an entrepreneurial spirit; concepts still taught today as the defining factors of production in an economy.

During the 1990s (after the collapse of Soviet Union) a democratic revolution of humanist aspiration, not unlike that witnessed by Tocqueville in 19th century America and by Adam Smith during the industrial revolution years, swept across the world. An increased emphasis on individual rights heightened awareness of ‘social discrimination’; ‘gender inequality’, with a much welcomed greater emphasis given to different sexual orientations. However, the political ramifications of such universally prescribed homogeneous theory of liberalism remained ambiguous and understudied.

As a result, individuals from different socio-cultural backgrounds, today find themselves ‘herded by capitalism and technology’, where unequal distribution of wealth has created ‘humiliating new hierarchies’ (earlier referred to as ‘negative solidarity’) and where redistributive justice, trickle-down economics, minority-rights etc. qualify more as simple rhetoric for ‘cosmopolitan liberals’.

Earlier shocks of modernity triggered by techno-capitalistic systems of 19th century Europe were more easily observed by communitarian social structures present across societies and the existing social structures. Today, as Pankaj Mishra argues in his book, many countries (particularly emerging countries), in their quest to industrialize and ‘modernize’ are witnessing on one hand-rising literacy and declining fertility rates, yet on the other, they experience escalating crime, suicide and depression rates. These countries find themselves at ‘political and emotional conjunctures’ similar to the history of the ‘modernized’ world itself (seen in 18th, 19th -century France, Germany, Russia etc.).

Thus, what we see today is a widespread existential ‘moral and spiritual vacuum’, filled with ‘anarchic expressions of individuality, and mad quests for substitute religions and modes of transcendence’, similar to Dostoyevsky’s millennial fantasy of Moscow as the ‘Third Rome’ (19th century Europe), referred to by Mishra.

**Where we are now…**

The two converging forces of self-destruction today include a proliferating global civil war and the catastrophic effect of natural environment degradation. There is no simple solution to escape these forces of self-destruction, as most of the analytical reasoning used in explaining such forces by social scientists relies heavily on ‘materialist’ theoretical abstractions of homogeneously made references to nation and capital through techniques of statistics.
In an age of resentment, one may rather conclude by asking more questions instead of offering any straightforward reasonable solutions. Questions like-To what extent ‘triumphant axioms’ of ‘individual autonomy and interest-seeking’ as formulated, sanctified and promoted by a privileged minority work for the majority of a crowded and interdependent world?; Is today’s youth doomed (like many Europeans and Russians were in the past) to live in between a ‘sense of inadequacy’ and ‘fantasies of revenge’? Furthermore, in times of advancing bureaucratization and rise of extreme-right based nationalist sentiments, what kind of ‘charismatic leaders’ do we need in order to escape from such a modern world a world which Max Weber called an ‘iron cage’?

In trying to address some of these questions, we may do well to go beyond some of the traditional, mainstream analytical tools and methods and consider the ‘irreducible human being, her/his fears, desires and resentments’ as the unit of our analysis.

**Biography of the author**

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