

BOOK REVIEW

The World After Gaza: A History

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Pankaj Mishra's *The World After Gaza: A History* is an urgent book, an ethical book, a smart book. It needs to be read carefully to appreciate its virtues, a basic responsibility of reviewing missed in some ultra-leftist readings in the United States and in center-right ones in Germany. For the former, Mishra is a Zionist skill; for the latter, an anti-Zionist crusader who trades in the reverse racism of Black-White binaries. He is neither. He is thinking beyond such binaries, and the book has more interesting and important agendas. Because of these distortions, a full and accurate elaboration of the book's argument is necessary.

Mishra's agenda is to foreground the "psychic ordeal" that global publics endured in the live-streamed mass murder and starvation of the Palestinian civilian population in Gaza, including the head-shot sniping of children: acts of "political evil," he calls them. Observing them daily has poisoned the lives of millions, inflicting "an inner wound" by calling into memory the impunity with which colonial powers put down uprisings in their empires. The emotional toll of Gaza's "liquidation" is a feature of the book.

The psychic shock and burden have been intensified by Mishra's second prey: the justification of Israeli conduct by Western elites who defend it in the name of Holocaust memory—"never again." These elites have further implicated themselves by propounding "belligerent new forms of philosemitism" in the name of Western values. Has "organised remembrance become a handmaiden to brute power, and a legitimiser of violence and injustice?" he asks. Answering the question in the affirmative, he observes that the postwar order, which promised a universal standard of common humanity, human rights, and legal and political norms for all based on Shoah memory, has collapsed in the Israeli-Western campaign in Gaza—and implicitly in Hamas's attack as well, though it is not the subject of this book. "The orgy of killing that began on 7 October 2023 and continued for many months and in several countries has ruptured time and removed the world

from before Gaza to another era." Mishra sets great store on sentiment's wisdom here: we *feel* a profound rupture in Gaza because it has concentrated in that tiny strip the politics of mere self-preservation dressed up as the universal lesson of never again. People around the world sensed immediately that *if that* can be done to Palestinians there, what prevents them from being the next victim? What indeed?

To explain how we reached this end of history, the accomplished novelist and historian of anti-colonial thought presents his own intellectual biography. It is the vehicle to explore his journey from belief in the Shoah-centric memory regime, with its underwriting of Zionism, to his current understanding of today's genocidal conjuncture. *The World After Gaza* is the story of a flawed and failed intellectual romance with many Jewish thinkers, written with a disarming honesty that some reviewers have failed to appreciate. The concentration on them rather than Palestinian authors is by design rather than an oversight, then. The method is to elaborate their ideas as exemplars or as inspirations of structures of feeling and collective perception. An elegant stylist, Mishra is able to assemble an astonishing array of figures in time and space to tell a global story of the rise and fall of a moral order based on Shoah memory—and therewith Western morality.

His attraction to Jewish thinkers and Zionism was a function of his own early Hindu nationalism in India. Israel was widely admired in his milieu as a successful postcolonial nation that vanquished its enemies and constructed a powerful state with a loyal and disciplined citizenry. So intense was the desire for the postcolonial construction and assertion of the collective self that Indians could admire both Hitler's Germany and Israel without cognitive dissonance. He himself was drawn to Jewish thinkers and experiences because they resembled colonial ones. Like Asians and Africans under colonialism, Jews in Europe had to confront the demands of assimilation and similar insecurities

despite legal emancipation and economic success. He discerned W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness" in the many Jewish authors whose books he devoured, connecting their experiences with those of his own. The Shoah, too, he saw emanating from decades of Western imperial violence; this basic point, noted by Aime Cesaire and Hannah Arendt in the 1950s, seemed obvious to him even if it is now controversial in Western scholarship. Jewish and colonial worlds were connected in solidarities of suffering—at least in his cosmopolitan imagination.

As Hindu supremacism grew, however, the young Mishra turned away from nationalism and the postcolonial state. He observed how anticolonial nationalists had internalized Western racism and lost their moral bearings in seeking to overcome the accusations of feminine weakness. Here, too, some Jewish and anticolonial thinkers provided critical categories and distance. So did meeting Palestinians at Indian universities and reading the work of Palestinian intellectuals like Ghassan Kanafani, Raja Shehadeh, and Ghada Karmi. How Israel was founded at the cost of Palestinian self-determination, indeed by ethnic cleansing and property theft, was integrated into his developing world view.

Even then, Mishra confesses, he clung to the justice of the Zionist cause until he recognized in Israel's development the same atavistic tendencies he witnessed in India: racist contempt toward the Muslim minority driven by a "pitiless national ethos" that divides humanity into the strong and the weak, the latter to be crushed pre-emptively in the name of survival. He calls this a "nihilistic survival-of-the-strongest ideology" that all Israeli governments effectively endorse. Now, Palestinians rather than Israelis began to look like him, and he "felt implicated in their plight."

Mishra came to the bitter realization that it was necessary to ask whether, in Gaza, the legacy of the Shoah represented a rupture or continuity with all that he abhorred in modernity: social Darwinism, European nationalism, and imperialism—even the German variety of *Lebensraum*. Far from undergirding a culture of universal human rights and international justice, he has now concluded, Holocaust memory in Israel and beyond functions to undermine those ideals, the country becoming a favored Western laboratory to produce and test "tools used by other ethnonationalists to repress their peoples." Chapters tracing the function of Holocaust memory in Germany and the US demonstrate how Shoah memory was placed at the service of geopolitical loyalty to Israel—at the expense of antifascist thinkers like Primo Levi, the book's intellectual and moral talisman. This loyalty culminated in the violent crushing of student protests on US and German campuses since 2023 as well as with the White nationalist attraction to Israel as a model to emulate.

In turn, this geopolitical position has awakened what Mishra calls a "deterritorialized" anticolonial memory of Western imperial violence, embodied by South Africa's case against Israel for genocide in Gaza at the International Court of Justice. The appeal of this memory, widespread in the student activist scene, was never appreciated in the United States. Instead, as Mishra explains, US elites were incredulous at the protest moment and persisted in making serial foreign policy blunders. For all that, Mishra is uninterested in memory competition or culture wars;

Manichean tendencies (a term he takes from Levi) and absolutisms of any kind—even in the student movement—are rooted in the narcissism of "hereditary victimhood." His arresting term is "atrocious hucksterism," the tool of the postcolonial nationalists that he deplors.

To move beyond such defensive crouches that Mishra addressed in his book, *The Age of Anger* (2017), he urges that the conditions of vulnerability and humiliation that made Zionism and other anti-colonial nationalisms attractive to millions be addressed: the search for a stable collective identity, security, and dignity. He sees these recruited, in a distorted way, by the popularity of authoritarian populism in conditions of failed globalization: its promises having created expectations that global and national inequalities make impossible to fulfill. Clashing memory cultures—anticolonial struggles versus the Shoah—are not only unable to offer solutions but are part of the problem. Exhausted in a global impasse of rival survivalist projects of "never again," humanity faces the future without hope, Mishra fears.

Students in the Global North have witnessed this genocidal violence, but in their absolutism, they express rather than offer remedies to the suffering, he seems to imply. Their experiences and resistance to the survivalist psychosis, then, convey an existential, human truth that state authorities and university administrations have scrambled to hide and to repress. Mishra ends honestly, I think, preferring to concede that they will be crushed and that "the Israeli onslaught" and its Western support might well succeed.

There are few consolations in his somber conclusion from early 2025. If there is any hope to be nurtured, he suggests briefly in his Epilogue, it is in the kind of memory negotiation that Michael Rothberg theorized as "multi-directional." The mutual recognition of what Mishra calls the "death instinct at work in modern history"—the exploitation and mass violence unleashed by national elites—is his ground for any optimism: only by exploring the common experiences of suffering can a pluralist future be imagined.

The World After Gaza is, of course, not an academic book and should not be judged as such. Academic specialists like readers of this journal are not Mishra's audience. It does not matter that the chapter on Germany is derivative. He knows that and acknowledges the work of others. His book is much more interesting and readable than a conventional scholarly tome because it is not shackled by the need to reference scholarly debates removed from contemporary politics. Instead, it engages the general reader directly with his parsing of iconic authors and the big picture framing of an acute crisis. Given the depravity of the Israeli destruction of Gaza (and, more incrementally, of the West Bank) and its implication of Holocaust memory and the ethical self-understanding of thought and political leaders who excuse or deny this destruction, analyses like this are an urgent necessity. If this is a book that delineates problems rather than presents solutions, doing so is the necessary condition for the latter. What is certain is that the world after Gaza is going to be a much nastier place than this book's misguided reviewers seem to think.