

## Praise for *Bland Fanatics*

‘[Pankaj Mishra’s] vision is unusually broad, accommodating and resistant to categorisation. It is the kind of vision the world needs right now.’

– *Financial Times*

‘The heir to Edward Said.’

– *The Economist*

‘In a lacerating introduction and 16 acidic chapters... Mishra artfully pummels liberalism’s Grand Narrative.’

– *The New York Times*

‘Mishra’s writings have been important in exposing the narrow parochialism of western intellectuals and in bringing the history of the rest of the world into discussions of European and American history and politics.’

– *The Guardian*

‘A searing critique of western liberalism.’

– *The Hindu*

‘Mishra has been beating this drum for more than a decade... His new collection, *Bland Fanatics*, lays out the case in essays dating back to 2008. Reading them now... it’s hard not to think: You know, he might have had a point.’

– *Foreign Policy*

## A Note on the Author

Pankaj Mishra is the acclaimed author of eight books of fiction and non-fiction including *The Romantics* and *Age of Anger*. He writes frequently for *The New York Times*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Guardian*, *The New Yorker*, *London Review of Books*, *Bloomberg View*, among other American, British and Indian publications. *Age of Anger* won the Tata Literature Live! Non-fiction Book Award and was a *New York Times* notable book.

# Bland Fanatics

Liberals, Race and Empire

Pankaj Mishra

 juggernaut

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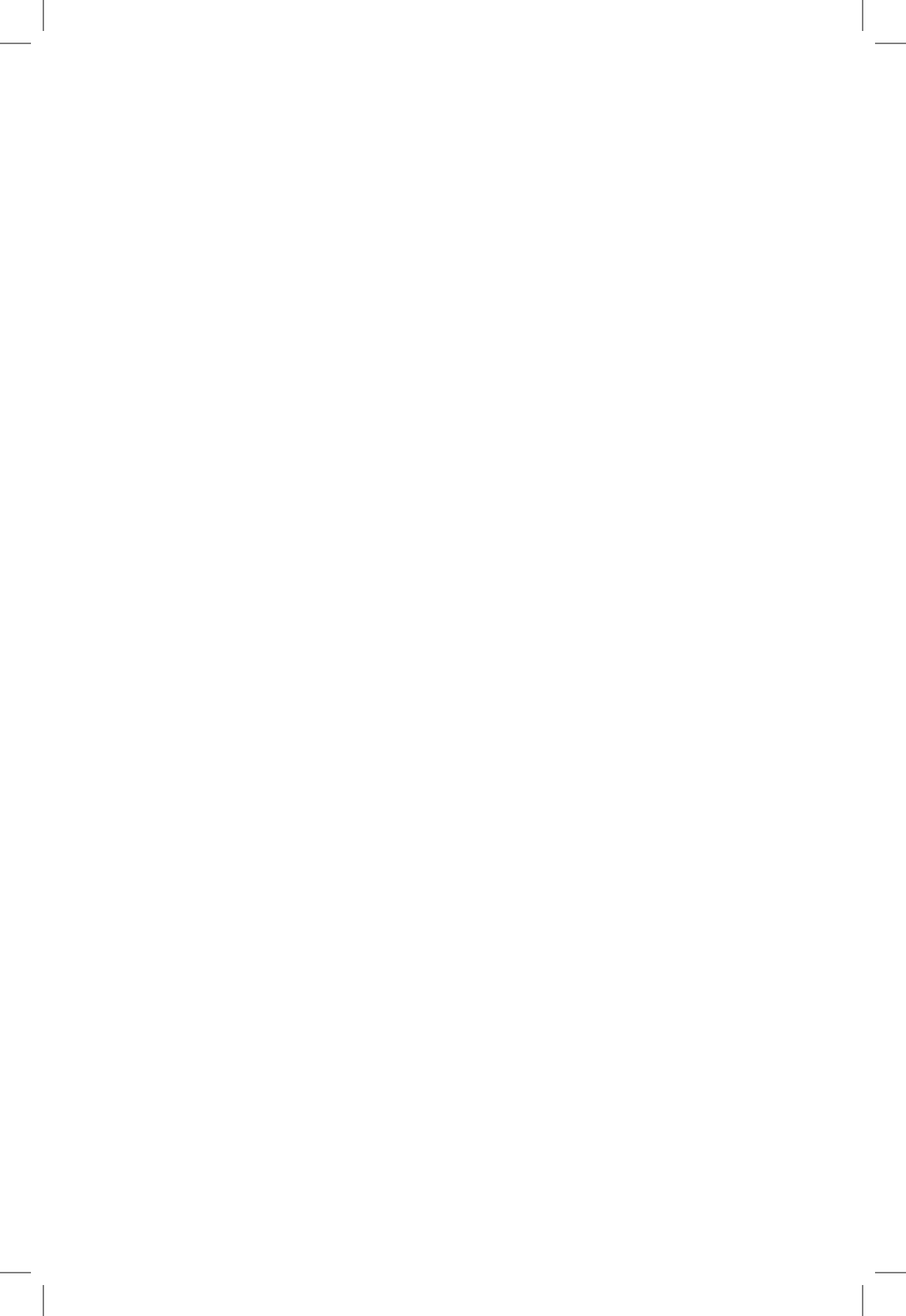
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# Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	I
1. Watch this Man	16
2. The Culture of Fear	32
3. The Religion of Whiteness	45
4. The Personal as Political	61
5. The Man of Fourteen Points	72
6. Bland Fanatics	87
7. <i>The Age of the Crisis of Man</i>	102
8. Free Markets and Social Darwinism in Mumbai	114
9. The Lure of Fascist Mysticism	121
10. What Is Great about Ourselves	128
11. Why Do White People Like What I Write?	141
12. The Mask It Wears	158
13. The Final Religion	173
14. Bumbling Chumocrats	181
15. The <i>Economist</i> and Liberalism	186
16. England's Last Roar	200
<i>Index</i>	212



# Introduction

*I Want Everyone to Become an American*

Thomas Friedman

*Someday we must write the history of our own obscurity –  
manifest the density of our narcissism*

Roland Barthes

The essays in this book were written in response to the Anglo-American delusions that climaxed in Brexit, the election of Donald Trump and, finally, a calamitous response to the COVID-19 outbreak. These range from the nineteenth-century dream of imperial-era liberalism long championed by the *Economist*, in which capital, goods, jobs and people freely circulate, through Henry Luce's proclamation of an 'American century' of free trade and 'modernisation theory' – the attempt by American Cold Warriors to seduce the post-colonial world away from communist-style revolution and into the gradualist alternative of consumer capitalism and democracy – to the catastrophic humanitarian wars and demagogic explosions of our times.

'Among the lesser culprits of history', Reinhold Niebuhr wrote in 1957, at the height of the Cold War, 'are the bland fanatics of western civilization who regard the highly contingent achievements of our culture as the final form and norm of human existence.' For Niebuhr, the bigger culprits of history were, of course, communists and fascists. A dedicated anti-communist, the American theologian was vulnerable to phrases such as 'the moral superiority of Western civilization'. Nevertheless, he

could see the peculiar trajectory of liberalism: how ‘a dogma which was intended to guarantee the economic freedom of the individual became the “ideology” of vast corporate structures of a later period of capitalism, used by them, and still used, to prevent a proper political control of their power’. He was also alert to the fundamentalist creed that has shaped our age – that Western-style capitalism and liberal democracy will be gradually generalised around the world, and every society, in short, ought to evolve just as Britain and the United States did.

Of course, Niebuhr could not have anticipated that the bland fanatics who made the Cold War so treacherous would come to occupy, at its end, history’s centre stage. Incarnated as liberal internationalists, neocon democracy promoters and free-market globalisers, they would blunder through a world grown more complex and intractable, and help unravel large parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America before sowing political chaos in their own societies.

The global history of the post-1945 ideologies of liberalism and democracy, or a comprehensive sociology of Anglo-America and Anglo- and America-philic intellectuals, is yet to be written, though the world they made and unmade is entering its most treacherous phase yet. Most of us are still only emerging, bleary-eyed, from the frenetic post-Cold War decades when, as Don DeLillo wrote, ‘the dramatic climb of the Dow and the speed of the internet summoned us all to live permanently in the future, in the utopian glow of cyber-capital’.

But it has long been clear that the global wager on unregulated markets, and military interventions on behalf of them, were the most ambitious ideological experiments undertaken in the modern era. Their adepts, allies and facilitators, from Greece to Indonesia, were also far more influential than their socialist and communist rivals. *Homo economicus*, the autonomous, reasoning, rights-bearing subject of liberal philosophy, came to stalk all societies with some fantastical plans to universally escalate production and consumption. The vernacular of modernity



## INTRODUCTION

coined in London, New York and Washington, DC, came to define the common sense of public intellectual life across all continents, radically altering the way in which much of the world's population understood society, economy, nation, time and individual and collective identity.

Of course, those trying to look beyond the exalted rhetoric of liberal politics and economics rarely found any corresponding realities. My own education in this absence began through an experience of Kashmir, where India, billed as the world's largest democracy, descended into a form of Hindu supremacism and racist imperialism of the kind it liberated itself from in 1947. I went to the valley in 1999 with many of the prejudices of the liberal Indian 'civiliser' – someone who placidly assumed that Kashmiri Muslims were much better off being aligned with 'secular', 'liberal' and 'democratic' India than with the Islamic state of Pakistan.

The brutal realities of India's military occupation of Kashmir and the blatant falsehoods and deceptions that accompanied it forced me to revisit many of the old critiques of Western imperialism and its rhetoric of progress. When my critical articles on Kashmir appeared in the year 2000 in the *Hindu* and the *New York Review of Books*, they were attacked at home most vociferously by self-styled custodians of India's 'liberal democracy' rather than by Hindu nationalists. I had come up against an influential ideology of Indian exceptionalism, which claimed moral prestige and geopolitical significance for India's uniquely massive and diverse liberal democracy.

Many of those righteous notions reeked of upper-caste sanctimony and class privilege. Piously invoking the 'idea of India', the country's experiment with a secular and liberal polity, the fetishists of formal and procedural democracy seemed unbothered by the fact that people in Kashmir and India's north-eastern border states lived under de facto martial law, where security forces had unlimited licence to massacre and rape, or that a

great majority of the Indian population found the promise of equality and dignity underpinned by rule of law and impartial institutions to be a remote, almost fantastical, ideal.

For decades, India benefited from a Cold War-era conception of ‘democracy’, which reduced it to a morally glamorous label for the way rulers are elected, rather than for the kinds of power they hold, or the ways they exercise it. As a non-communist country that held routine elections, India possessed a matchless international prestige despite consistently failing – worse than many Asian, African and Latin American countries – to provide its citizens with even the basic components of a dignified existence. The halo of virtue around India shone brighter as its governments embraced free markets and communist-run China abruptly emerged as a challenger to the West. Even as India descended into Hindu nationalism, an exuberant consensus about India was developing among Anglo-American elites: that liberal democracy had acquired deep roots in Indian soil, fertilising it for the growth of free markets.

For a writer of my background, it became imperative to challenge this unanimity – first at home, and then, increasingly, abroad. In many ways, India’s own bland fanatics, who seemed determined to nail their cherished ‘idea of India’ into Kashmiri hearts and minds, prepared me for the spectacle of a liberal intelligentsia cheerleading the war for ‘human rights’ in Iraq, with the kind of humanitarian rhetoric about freedom, democracy and progress that was originally heard from European imperialists in the nineteenth century.

It had long been clear to me that Western ideologues during the Cold War absurdly prettified the rise of the ‘democratic’ West. The long struggle against communism, which claimed superior moral virtue, had required many expedient feints. The centuries of civil war, imperial conquest, brutal exploitation and genocide were suppressed in accounts that showed how Westerners made the modern world, and became with their

liberal democracies the superior people everyone else ought to catch up with. What I didn't realise until I started to inhabit the knowledge ecosystems of London and New York is how evasions and suppressions had resulted, over time, in a massive store of defective knowledge about the West and the non-West alike. Simple-minded and misleading ideas and assumptions, drawn from this blinkered history, had come to shape the speeches of Western statesmen, think tank reports and newspaper editorials, while supplying fuel to countless log-rolling columnists, television pundits and terrorism experts.

It may be hard to remember today, especially for younger readers, that the mainstream of Anglo-America in the early 2000s deferentially hosted figures like Niall Ferguson, and arguments that the occupation and subjugation of other people's territory and culture were an efficacious instrument of civilisation, and that we needed more such emancipatory imperialism to bring intransigently backward peoples in line with the advanced West. Astonishingly, British imperialism, seen for decades by Western scholars and anti-colonial leaders alike as a racist, illegitimate and often predatory despotism, came to be repackaged in our own time as a benediction that, in Ferguson's words, 'undeniably pioneered free trade, free capital movements and, with the abolition of slavery, free labour'.

Never mind that free trade, introduced to Asia through gunboats, destroyed nascent industry in conquered countries, that 'free' capital mostly went to the white settler states of Australia and Canada, and that indentured rather than 'free' labour replaced slavery. The fairy tales about how Britain made the modern world weren't just aired at some furtive far-right conclave or hedge funders' luxury retreat. Mainstream television, radio, and the broadsheets took the lead in making them seem intellectually respectable to a wide audience. Politicians as well as broadcasters deferred to their belligerent illogic. The BBC set aside prime time for Niall Ferguson's belief in the necessity of reinstating imperialism. The Tory minister for

education asked him to advise on the history syllabus. Looking for a more authoritative audience, the revanchists then crossed the Atlantic to provide an intellectual armature to Americans trying to remake the modern world through free markets and military force.

Of course, the bards of a new universal liberal empire almost entirely suppressed Asian, African and Latin American voices. And the very few allowed access to the mainstream press found that their unique privilege obliged them to, first of all, clear the ground of misrepresentations and downright falsehoods that had built up over decades. This often frustrating struggle defined my own endeavour, reflected in the pages that follow.

It was hard to avoid, for the prejudices were deeply entrenched in every realm of journalistic endeavour, looming up obdurately whether one wrote about Afghanistan, India or Japan. To give one example: In *Free to Choose*, a hugely influential book (and ten-part television series), Milton and Rose Friedman had posed a seductive binary of rational markets versus interfering governments (what came to underpin World Bank and International Monetary Fund reports, policies and prescriptions for the next two decades). Friedman, who inspired the ‘Chicago Boys’ re-engineering Chile’s economy after the CIA ousted Salvador Allende in 1973, sought intellectual vindication in East Asia, claiming that Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore had succeeded owing to their reliance on ‘private markets’. In *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama echoed this assertion, arguing that East Asia’s economies, by ‘repeating the experience of Germany and Japan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, have proven that economic liberalism allows late modernizers to catch up with and even overtake’ the West.

This fable about the East Asian ‘miracle’, then, became central to mainstream reporting about Asia. It did not tally at all with the historical record, which showed that state-led modernisation

and economic protectionism were as central to the economies of pre-war Japan and Germany as to post-war East Asia; more recently, the long traditions of technocratic governance in East Asia have proven crucial to its relatively successful response to the coronavirus pandemic while Anglo-American free-marketeers lethally flounder. But such facts about ‘state intervention’, as blithely ignored in the *New York Times* as in the *Economist* and the *Wall Street Journal*, seemed to engage very few people.

Of course, the fables about free markets just happened to match the efforts of the World Bank, the IMF and other institutions of international economic management, whose priorities of poverty alleviation and public sector development had given way by the early 1980s to privatisation, trade deregulation, the reduction of price subsidies and relaxation of limits on foreign investments. By the time the Soviet Union imploded and an army of Americanisers invaded Russia, the free-marketeers were emboldened enough to think they had the power, as in Reagan’s favourite line from Thomas Paine, ‘to begin the world over again’. Saul Bellow, writing to a friend in 1992, warned that ‘the free-market economic theorists have done too well. They have taught the country that laissez faire won the cold war’. The aggressive promotion of a new form of what Albert Hirschman called ‘mono-economics’ was accompanied by the breathtaking conceit that the fall of communism had inaugurated a benignly post-ideological age. As it turned out, those hoping to begin the world over again by administering economic shock therapy to Russia were not disappointed. Living standards collapsed; Russia suffered a severe mortality crisis, resulting in millions of additional male deaths in the 1990s; and the crime rate skyrocketed – a series of disasters that culminated in the destruction of the rouble and bankruptcy in 1998.

Having planted their flag over the Kremlin, the crusaders were eyeing new conquests around the world. By the late 1990s, there were many powerful and wealthy sponsors of the Washington

consensus that was being imposed on Latin America, Asia and Africa. New centres of intellectual and political authority had emerged in American universities, business schools and philanthropic foundations. Non-Americans rose to senior positions in American-dominated international institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. Today, right-wing think tanks such as the American Enterprise Institute, the Cato Institute and the Peterson Institute employ many more economists and journalists of non-American origin.

Much of the work of exporting the iron cages of American modernity was increasingly done, by the early 2000s, by foreign-born academics and think-tankers, who interfaced resourcefully between the elites of their ancestral and adopted countries. A prominent example of such intellectual synergy is Jagdish Bhagwati, in his own words the ‘world’s foremost free-trader’ and the godfather of India’s marketised economy. From his pulpit at Columbia University and the Council for Foreign Relations, Bhagwati and his disciples kept up a drumbeat of neo-liberal ideas arguing that no nation can advance without reining in labour unions, eliminating trade barriers, ending subsidies, etc.

Even the terrorist attacks of 9/11 did not shake such convictions. The suspicion that ‘Islamofascism’ had declared war on liberalism actually roused many Anglo-American intellectuals into a bolder attempt to make the world over again in their preferred image of Anglo-America. Modernisation theorists, respectful of the *longue durée* in history, had entrusted the nurturing of democracy to middle-class beneficiaries of capitalism. But a ‘post-ideological’ generation of liberal internationalists as well as neocons now thought that democracy could be implanted through shock-and-awe therapy in societies that had no tradition of it.

In their dominant discourse, the racial and religious ‘other’ was either an irredeemable brute, the exact opposite of rationally

self-interested Americans, to be exterminated universally through a relentless war on terror, or an American-style *homo economicus* who was prevented from pursuing his rational self-interest by his deficient political leaders and institutions. In the fantasy that drove the invasion and occupation of Iraq, freedom miraculously appears when the despotic state is emasculated and free markets, finally allowed to flourish, spontaneously harmonise individual interests and desires.

More importantly, the terrorist attacks on September 11 provoked an assertion of civilisational identity and solidarity, paving the way for more overt expressions of white supremacy. A small group of criminals and fanatics did not pose a mortal threat to the most powerful and wealthy societies in history. Nevertheless, the maniacal cries of ‘Allahu Akbar’ were met by a louder drumbeat of ‘Western values’ and confidence-building invocations of the West’s apparent quintessence, such as the Enlightenment. The collective affirmations of certain Western freedoms and privileges – ‘we must agree on what matters: kissing in public places, bacon sandwiches, disagreement, cutting-edge fashion’, Salman Rushdie wrote – became an emotional reflex. Susan Sontag seemed tactless to many in speaking of the ‘sanctimonious, reality-concealing rhetoric’ of ‘confidence-building and grief management’ that resembled the ‘unanimously applauded, self-congratulatory bromides of a Soviet Party Congress’. She was attacked for insisting, ‘Let’s by all means grieve together, but let’s not be stupid together.’

Her warnings went unheeded. ‘I’m happy to be a laptop general,’ Paul Berman wrote in *Terror and Liberalism*, reprimanding those unwilling to join the new crusade for liberalism in the Middle East. During the Vietnam War, Hannah Arendt noted that members of the Democratic Administration had frequent recourse to phrases like ‘monolithic communism’ and ‘second Munich’ and deduced from this an inability ‘to confront reality on its own terms because they had always some parallels in mind that “helped” them to understand those terms’. Similarly,

Berman, who wasn't known previously for his expertise on modern political movements east of Europe, identified Islamism as a derivative version of the totalitarian enemies – fascism and communism – that liberalism had already fought throughout the twentieth century. After 'trolling the Islamic bookstores of Brooklyn', he offered a genealogy of 'Islamism' that rested almost entirely on his reading of Sayyid Qutb, an ideologue of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. According to Berman, liberal intellectuals were obliged to do battle with the new nihilistic fascism, which included secular dictatorships like Iraq's as well as pan-Islamist movements. His laptop bombing quickly united a variety of public figures, from Richard Holbrooke to Martin Amis, in the cause.

Martin Amis published an essay on Islam and Islamism, which went on for more than 10,000 words without describing an individual experience of Muslim societies deeper than Christopher Hitchens's acquisition of an Osama T-shirt in Peshawar and the Amis family's failure to enter, after closing time, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. 'The impulse towards rational inquiry', Amis asserted, 'is by now very weak in the rank and file of the Muslim male.' There were countless other startling claims (according to Amis, the army was on the Islamist side in the Algerian civil war) in his essay, whose pseudo-scholarship and fanatical conviction of moral superiority made it resemble nothing more than one of bin Laden's desperately literary screeds.

Among the literati, big words like 'Salafist totalitarianism' and 'Islamofascism' helped project the illusion of profound knowledge. They also satisfied the nostalgic desire of some sedentary writers to see themselves in the avant-garde of a noble crusade against an evil '-ism'. The fervour of the ideologue *manqué* made no room for the sober fact that almost every nation state harbours a disaffected and volatile minority, whose size varies constantly in inverse relation to the alertness, tact and wisdom of the majority population.

It was a demoralising spectacle: talented writers nibbling on



clichés picked to the bone by tabloid hacks, and a counterfeit imperial history and minatory visions of frenziedly breeding Muslims being enlisted in large-scale violence against voiceless peoples. But, as Niebuhr pointed out, the ‘men of culture’, with their developed faculty of reasoning, tend to ‘give the hysterias of war and the imbecilities of national politics more plausible excuses than the average man is capable of inventing’. As it happened, the ‘public conversation’ about Islam proposed by Amis was never held. Its terms had been set too low, and it came to be dominated by an isolated and vain chattering class that, all shook up by a changing world, sought to reassure themselves and us by digging an unbridgeable Maginot Line around our minds and hearts.

Meanwhile, neo-imperialist assaults on Iraq and Afghanistan served to highlight the actual legacy of British imperialism: tribal, ethnic and religious conflicts that stifled new nation states at birth or doomed them to endless civil war punctuated by ruthless despotisms. Defeat and humiliation were compounded by the revelation that those charged with bringing civilisation from the West to the rest indulged – yet again – in indiscriminate murder and torture.

Ardent young socio-economic engineers imported from America to Baghdad’s Green Zone tried to achieve everything in Iraq that the free-marketeers hoped for at home – the abolition of welfare, privatisation of the military and prisons, and general deregulation. This most audacious experiment yet in Americanisation not only provoked a ferocious insurgency; it triggered the break-up of the country, the rise of Islamic State and the unravelling of the Middle East. Chaos and mass suffering in Russia had already helped to turn a dour former KGB operative, Vladimir Putin, into his country’s unlikely saviour (and brazen meddler in America’s own elections).

Eventually, the disappointed and disaffected in the very heartland of liberal modernity turned a serial groper into their

saviour. As Donald Trump's victory in November 2016 revealed, the Washington consensus had created too many victims in Washington, DC's own hinterland. While the battle for democracy and capitalism raged in the Levant, they were being steadily undermined west of the Potomac by extreme concentrations of wealth, the steady criminalisation of the poor, dysfunctional politics, a rogue security establishment and a heedless media.

More than a decade after September 11, the reality-concealing rhetoric of Western liberalism kept participating in a race to extremes with its ideological twin, in an escalated dialectic of bombing from the air and slaughter on the ground. It grew more aggressive in proportion to the spread of the non-West's chaos to the West, and also blended faster into a white supremacist hatred of immigrants, refugees and Muslims (and, often, those who just 'look' Muslim). Even more menacingly, it postponed the moment of self-reckoning and course correction among Anglo-American elites.

In one of his last interviews, Tony Judt lamented his 'catastrophic' Anglo-American generation whose cossetted members included George W. Bush and Tony Blair. Having grown up after the defining wars and hatreds of the West's twentieth century, 'in a world of no hard choices, neither economic nor political', these historically weightless elites believed that 'no matter what choice they made, there would be no disastrous consequences.' A member of the Bush administration brashly affirmed its arrogance of power in 2004 after what then seemed a successful invasion of Iraq: 'When we act,' he boasted, 'we create our own reality.'

'A pretty crappy generation,' Judt concluded, 'when you come to think of it.' In the end, its retro megalomania could not be sustained in a world where, for better and for worse, cultural as well as economic power was leaking away from the old Anglo-American establishment. An enlarged global public society, with its many dissenting and corrective voices, emerged

in the last decade; today, it quickly calls the bluff of lavishly credentialled intellectual elites.

A great correction is under way today, with triumphalist narratives of British and American exceptionalism interrogated as stringently as the post-colonial claims to virtue once were. The coronavirus cruelly exposed the reality they had long concealed: heavily indebted states, bailed-out corporations, impoverished working classes, and eviscerated public health systems. Anglo-American self-deceptions, which always exacted a high death toll abroad, from the Irish famine to Iraq, have become mass-murderous at home; a blusteringly casual attitude to the pandemic has resulted in tens of thousands of premature deaths in Britain and the United States. The world as we have known it, moulded by the beneficiaries of both Western imperialism and anti-imperialist nationalism, is crumbling. Many of our exalted ideas about ourselves have collapsed. India's claims to exceptionalism appear to have been as unfounded as America's own. Fresh and broader struggles for freedom, equality and dignity loom. But, as the later essays in this collection point out, the newly emergent voices in the public sphere are still likely to be drowned out by loud and repetitive lamentations about the loss of Anglo-American poise and virtue.

These became especially loud after Boris Johnson joined Donald Trump in the leadership of the free world. From the Cold War through to the 'war on terror', the Caesarism that afflicted other nations was seen as peculiar to Asian and African peoples or blamed on the despotic traditions of Russians or Chinese, on African tribalism, Islam or the 'Arab mind'. But this analysis – amplified in a thousand books and opinion columns that located the enemies of democracy among menacingly alien people and their inferior cultures – did not prepare its audience for the sight of blond bullies and bunglers perched atop the world's greatest democracies. The barbarians, it turns out, were never at the gate; they have been ruling us for some time.

The belated shock of this realisation has made impotent

despair the dominant tone of establishment commentary on the events of the past few years. But this acute helplessness betrays something more significant. While democracy was being hollowed out in the West, mainstream politicians and columnists concealed its growing void by thumping their chests against its supposed foreign enemies – or cheerleading its supposed foreign friends. Decades of this deceptive and deeply ideological discourse have left many of our best and brightest stultified by the antics of Trump and Johnson, simultaneously aghast at the sharpened critiques of a resurgent left, and profoundly unable to reckon with the annihilation of democracy by its supposed friends abroad.

The vulnerabilities of Western democracy were evident long ago to the Asian and African subjects of the British Empire. Gandhi, who saw democracy as literally the rule of the people, the *demos*, claimed that it was merely ‘nominal’ in the West. It could have no reality so long as ‘the wide gulf between the rich and the hungry millions persists’ and voters ‘take their cue from their newspapers, which are often dishonest’. Inaugurating India’s own experiment with an English-style parliament and electoral system, B. R. Ambedkar, one of the main authors of the Indian constitution, warned that while the principle of one person, one vote conferred political equality, it left untouched grotesque social and economic inequalities. ‘We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment,’ he urged, ‘or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy.’ Today’s elected demagogues, who were chosen by aggrieved voters precisely for their skills in blowing up political democracy, have belatedly alerted many more to this contradiction. But the delay in heeding Ambedkar’s warning has been lethal.

What has become clearer since the coronavirus crisis is that modern democracies have for decades been lurching towards moral and ideological bankruptcy – unprepared by their own

## INTRODUCTION

publicists to cope with the political and environmental disasters that unregulated capitalism ceaselessly inflicts, even on such winners of history as Britain and the US. Having laboured to exclude a smelly past of ethnocide, slavery and racism – and the ongoing stink of corporate venality – from their perfumed notion of Anglo-American superiority, the bland fanatics have no nose for democracy's true enemies.

Besieged both at home and abroad, their authority as overlords, policemen and interpreters of the globe is increasingly challenged. If they repetitively ventilate their rage and frustration, or whinge incessantly about 'cancel culture' and the 'radical left', it is because that is all they can do. Their own mind-numbing simplicities about democracy, its enemies, friends, the free world and all that sort of thing, have doomed them to experience the contemporary world as an endless series of shocks and debacles. If rage, confusion and bewilderment mark their visages, it is because, today, their narcissism lies shattered, self-congratulation can no longer pose as an analytical framework, and rancorous ethno-nationalism in India and criminally inept autocrats in Britain and America have bluntly clarified that liberal democracy is not what we have – at least, not yet.