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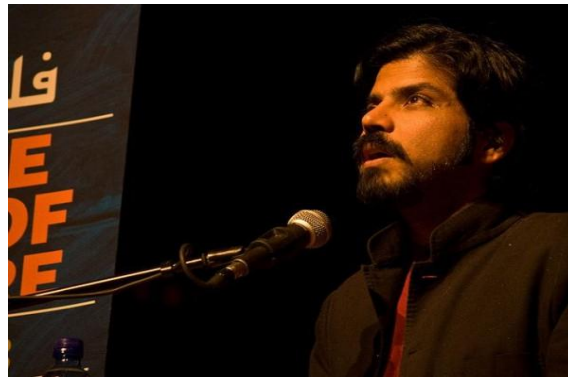
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Muhammad Idrees Ahmad: Archaeology of Revolutionary Knowledge

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By Muhammad Idrees Ahmad

1/30/2013



As Tsar Alexander III sat down for an evening at the St. Petersburg opera house in late 1887, he little knew that the performance would soon be upstaged by one much more dramatic. Shortly after the curtains rose, a slender, goateed man with azure eyes, dressed in a robe and turban, got up from a box nearby and proclaimed loudly: “I intend to say the evening prayer—*Allah-u-*

Akbar!” The audience sat bemused and soldiers waited impatiently as the man proceeded, unperturbed, with his evening prayers. His sole companion, the Russian-born intellectual Abdurreshid Ibrahim, squirmed in fear of his life.

Jamal ud-Din al-Afghani was determined to recruit Russian support in his campaign against the British. Having failed to secure an audience with the tsar, he had decided to use his daring as a calling card. The tsar’s curiosity was finally piqued and Afghani had his hearing.

This could be a scene out of Tolstoy or Lermontov; but so extraordinary a figure was Jamal ud-Din al-Afghani (1838-97), the peripatetic Muslim thinker and revolutionary, that inserting him into fiction would strain credulity. So, renowned essayist and novelist Pankaj Mishra has opted for historical essay and intellectual biography to profile the lives of Afghani and other equally remarkable figures in his new book *From the Ruins of Empire: The intellectuals who remade Asia*.

The book is a refreshing break from lachrymose histories of the East’s victimhood and laments about its past glories. It concerns a group of intellectuals who responded to the threat of western dominance with vigour and imagination. Together they engendered the intellectual currents that have shaped the last century of the region’s history.

Wild Man of Genius

The Jamal ud-Din al-Afghani’s long sojourn across Asia, Europe, and North Africa was animated by a search for dignity, self-strengthening, and self-determination. He was responding to the challenge of western modernity and European colonial domination. As Afghani saw it, an ossified Islam with a literalist interpretation of scripture was hindering Muslim progress. He was determined to reconcile Islam with rationality, and to develop a strategy that would leverage popular discontent to dislodge Western *colons* from Asia. The political vehicles he experimented with included Islamic reformism, ethnic nationalism, pan-Islamism, and, later, political violence (an idea he quickly abandoned after a disciple assassinated the Shah of Iran in 1896).

Described by English poet Wilfrid Blunt as a “wild man of genius,” Afghani’s strategies were in fact more visionary than wild. He preached syncretic nationalism in India, drawing on both Islamic and Hindu traditions. He advised the Afghan amir into confronting the Raj. He fomented Egypt’s first anti-British uprising. He inaugurated Iran’s consequential alliance between the clergy, intellectuals, and merchants. And he attempted to use the Ottoman Sultanate as the focus of a pan-Islamic challenge to Western imperialism. He was fêted by—and simultaneously antagonised—kings, khedives, amirs, sultans, shahs, and tsars. In the meantime, he conducted

debates with Ernest Renan, confronted British colonial officials, participated in the Great Game, romanced a German lover, established journals and secret societies, and mentored revolutionaries across the region. His disciples ranged from the nationalist Saad Zaghlul to the Islamist Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida. During his stay in Paris in the early 1880s, he also wrote for a French Communist paper, anticipating the anti-imperialist Red-Green alliances of the coming centuries. (Rashid Rida would later emulate him in penning articles for Ho Chi Minh's journal in Vietnam.)

Afghani's influence has lived on through figures as diverse as Muhammad Iqbal, Ali Shariati, Abul Ala Maududi, and even Pakistan's Imran Khan, who uses an Islamic idiom in the service of a reformist agenda. Egypt's three dominant political trajectories of the past century—reformist nationalism, Islamist populism, and revolutionary violence—can all be traced to Afghani's influence. His disciples played central roles in establishing both the Wafd Party and the Muslim Brotherhood. His ideas were later adopted and stripped of their rationalist content by Sayyid Qutb to turn them into a pretext for political violence. His acolytes also included the Egyptian Jewish playwright and journalist James Sanua, and the *fin de siècle* women's rights activist Qasim Amin.

Waking Giants

China's ascent to super-power status was anything but smooth; perhaps no one figure was more significant in jumpstarting the somnolent empire's progress than Liang Qichao (1873-1929), the second major intellectual profiled by Mishra. Like his mentor Kang Youwei, he was a monarchist steeped in Confucian tradition before embarking on an independent trajectory after being banished from a Manchu court in thrall to Western powers. His initial response to the West's challenge was to use Occidental ideas to invigorate traditional thinking. He went so far as to embrace Social Darwinist views about the hierarchy of races.

Where Alexis de Tocqueville had been impressed by the vibrancy of American democracy, Liang was horrified by its gross inequalities, oligarchic rule, and severe mistreatment of minorities.

But Liang's admiration for the West proved ephemeral, dissipating after a fundraising tour of the United States. Where Alexis de Tocqueville had been impressed by the vibrancy of American democracy, Liang was horrified by its gross inequalities, oligarchic rule, and severe mistreatment of minorities. He consequently took a jaundiced view of democracy itself, despite having himself pioneered mass-politics in China. With his mentor Kang, he had organized examinees for imperial posts to petition the emperor to annul a humiliating treaty with Japan. Kang had also established publishing houses, libraries, and schools in order to create a Chinese "people."

But creating a people had consequences. By early 20th century, Chinese nationalism had acquired a racist Han character with an explicitly anti-Manchu orientation. Sun Yat-sen's nationalist revolution in 1911 made Liang leery of disruptive change. Liang was dismayed to see the modernism that he had helped foster degrade into slavish aping of the West. The excesses of nationalists and Communists impressed upon him the enduring merits of Confucianism, with its universal precepts of spiritual freedom and social harmony.

In 1917, after arguing for China's entry into the First World War as a means to garner international clout, Liang, like his countrymen, was shocked by its treatment at the Paris Peace Conference. The Great Powers conceded nothing. Like European Modernists, Liang was also shaken by the wasteland left by the war. If the disabused realism of his post-war writing seemed at times an echo of Thucydides, at other times it anticipated structural realists like John Mearsheimer. "In the world there is only power," he wrote. "That the strong always rule the weak is in truth the first great universal rule of nature. Hence, if we wish to attain liberty, there is no other road: we can only seek first to be strong."

China endured a nationalist revolution, a civil war, a Communist revolution, and much else before assuming its present status. In this most stable and prosperous phase, however, it seems remarkably like the strong, autocratic, modernizing state that Liang envisioned, and that unreconstructed imperialists had always feared. At a Hong Kong reception in 1889, Rudyard Kipling had wondered, "What will happen when China really wakes up?" What for Kipling was a nightmare was for his contemporary Liang an abiding dream. Modern China is a realization of both.

Thus Spake Tagore

Liang Qichao's hard-nosed realism was no barrier to the strong bond he formed with the uncompromisingly idealistic Rabindranath Tagore. Welcoming him on a lecture tour of China in 1924, Liang greeted the Bengali sage by saying, "our old brother [India], 'affectionate and missing' for more than a thousand years, is now coming to call on his little brother [China]." But by that time opinion had shifted sharply in China. A newer generation of modernists wanted to sever all connection with the past. Tagore's warnings against uncritical emulation of the West met with a sceptical audience.

There was nothing inevitable about Tagore's disillusionment with the West. He was the scion of a liberal Anglophile family whose patriarchs had participated in the British opium trade. British Orientalists introduced him to the indigenous literary traditions that forged his philosophy. Unlike his friend Gandhi, Tagore admired the West. But the betrayal of the Paris Peace

Conference and the grand imperial carve-up of Asia exhausted Tagore's sympathies. In 1919 he wrote Romain Rolland: "there is hardly a corner in the vast continent of Asia where men have come to feel any real love for Europe."

Colonialism finally ran up against mass politics and was defeated. None of this would have happened without the supra-national conversations inaugurated by these remarkable individuals.

But Tagore's disenchantment did not mean a retreat into defensive nativism. He was as likely to countenance imperialist cant issued from Japanese pan-Asianism as Western *mission civilisatrice*. He was never a hostage to his audience. At a 1930 dinner party in New York he accused his audience including Franklin Roosevelt, Sinclair Lewis, and Hans Morgenthau, of "exploit[ing] those who are helpless and humiliate[ing] those who are unfortunate with this gift." He was equally disobliging when hosted by the Japanese Prime Minister in Tokyo: "The New Japan," he told the gathered dignitaries, "is only an imitation of the West."

Though anti-imperialist, Tagore was leery of radical nationalism. Once Japanese nationalists set it on an expansionist trajectory he vowed never to return, though he had earlier considered Japan as a model of indigenous modernization. Radical forces superseded him in India too which was finally fractured by the national egoism he had warned against. Tagore's voice survived only in the national anthems of truncated India and Bangladesh. (His influence has also lived on through the experimental school he established in 1901; alumni include Amartya Sen and Satyajit Ray.)

Return of the Natives

The scope and ambition of *From the Ruins of Empire* would have overwhelmed a lesser writer. Mishra delivers with panache. He tackles the complex histories and politics of the formerly colonized realms with rigour and sensitivity. His sharply drawn characters are woven into a narrative that is riveting and insightful. But it is Mishra's unerring political instincts, unencumbered by ideology, that make this book such a compelling read. Few writers possess the facility with which Mishra moves from acute journalistic observation to confident historical analysis.

In the colonized lands Mishra writes of, there were few who suffered illusions about European power. But some did put stock in the promise of America. When, in anticipation of the Paris Peace Conference, Wilson issued high-minded proclamations about national self-determination, everyone from Saad Zaghlul and Liang Qichao to Ho Chi Minh flocked to Paris to petition for the rights of their respective nations. All were disappointed. The humiliation that representatives from Asia and Africa suffered stung everyone. Little had they known Wilson was responding

mainly to the Bolshevik threat; his promises of self-determination were aimed at an exclusively European audience. The idealists were disabused and the nationalists emboldened. Independence would not be granted; it would have to be seized.

Intuitive in retrospect, this idea was slow to gain wider purchase. The colonizers had easily crushed earlier insurrections, which lacked a unifying idea to lend coherence. But the seminal interventions of Afghani, Liang, and Tagore turned the vague *ressentiment* of the colonized into clearly articulated national projects. Colonialism finally ran up against mass politics and was defeated. None of this would have happened without the supra-national conversations inaugurated by these remarkable individuals.

The colonial legacy is finally being rolled back. But the sequence of events is not conforming to any known script.

The West has since built itself a reassuring mythology in which, moved by the moral example of individuals like Gandhi, it graciously bestowed independence upon its former possessions. But the one factor more than any other that precipitated the Empire's exit from Asia wasn't Gandhian *satyagraha*, but Japan's spectacular early victories over the colonial powers. Beginning on 8 December 1941, it took Japan just ninety days to take British, U.S., Dutch, and French possessions across East Asia, advancing all the way to the borders of British India. "There are few examples in history," writes Mishra, "of such dramatic humiliation of established powers." If, according to viceroy of India Lord Curzon, the Japanese victory over Russia at the Battle of Tsushima had been a "thunderclap" which reverberated "through the whispering galleries of the East," then Pearl Harbor was the storm that raised these voices to a roar. Japan was defeated in the end, but the nationalist fires it had kindled—mostly to advance its own imperial interests—could no longer be extinguished. The war sapped Western will and made decolonization inevitable.

Western power is still in decline, but Western perceptions of power remain oddly sanguine. From American presidential candidates' strident statements against China during the 2012 election campaign to the superfluous French measures to exclude Turkey from the EU, it seems Atlantic powers fail to grasp that America and Europe need China and Turkey just as much as they are needed by them. During Israel's November 2012 attack on Gaza, Egyptian and Turkish diplomatic initiatives made America all but irrelevant to the peace-making.

Straitjacketed by the imperatives of domestic politics, the West has been unable—or unwilling—to change course. Barack Obama had his Wilsonian moment in 2009, when he addressed the Muslim world from Cairo and moved many with his lofty rhetoric. But with his record of capitulations, his abject surrender to the Israeli right, and his international regime of extrajudicial

killings, hope proved ephemeral. It disabused Arabs of the expectation that a foreign power could midwife change. Dignity demanded action. Rights had to be seized and agency reclaimed.

If an earlier generation had confronted and overthrown the autocratic managers of empire, a new generation is now uprooting the authoritarianism of the postcolonial regimes that had been hitherto justified as a nation-building imperative. The colonial legacy is finally being rolled back. But the sequence of events is not conforming to any known script. It is toppling dictatorships both pro- and anti-Western. The bogeyman of Islamism has served an ecumenical purpose, invoked by left and right alike. But if there is a common thread uniting the myriad forces of the Arab uprisings, it is not the promise of an Islamic resurgence. It is a search for dignity, social justice, and self-determination. The revolutions have been creative and resolute, improvising means but never ceding agency. They have even instrumentalized Western power at times but conceded nothing in return.

It is too early to predict how the Arab Spring will fully play out. But one thing is clear: external bogeymen will no longer stifle citizens' demands for internal reform. The quality of these reforms will inevitably rest on the character of the ideas that inspire them. Here, however, Mishra is pessimistic. He notes that ideas with the capacity to inspire have been few and far between. Asia may be rebounding, he writes, but its success conceals "an immense intellectual failure." He laments "no convincingly universalist response exists today to Western ideas of politics and economy, even though these seem increasingly febrile and dangerously unsuitable in large parts of the world." This, however, is both a peril and an opportunity for the activists of the 21st century's first great insurrection.

In the St. Petersburg opera house, Afghani failed to induce the tsar to confront the British. Still, through words and deeds, he continued fomenting uprisings from Egypt to Persia to Afghanistan. His companion, Abdurrehid Ibrahim, later participated in the Libyan uprising against Italian rule. He also joined Egyptian and Indian exiles in Tokyo to forge an alliance with the Japanese in a pan-Asianist front against Western imperialism. Their successes were ephemeral, but the ideas endured. In the end there was the word—and it is resonating still.