Age of Anger

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A History of the Present

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juggernaut

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To my sisters, Ritu and Poonam, and their children,
Aniruddh, Siddhartha and Sudhanshu.

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Preface

I started thinking about this book in 2014 after Indian voters, including my own friends and relatives, elected Hindu supremacists to power, and Islamic State became a magnet for young men and women in Western democracies. I finished writing it during the week in 2016 in which Britain voted to leave the European Union. It went to the printers in the week that Donald Trump was elected president of the United States. Each of these earthquakes revealed fault lines that I felt had been barely noticed over the years, running through inner lives as well as nations, communities and families. The pages that follow try to make sense of bewildering, and often painful, experiences by re-examining a divided modern world, this time from the perspective of those who came late to it, and felt, as many people do now, left, or pushed, behind.

1. Prologue: Forgotten Conjunctures

> Everywhere, people are awaiting a messiah, and the air is laden with the promises of large and small prophets . . . we all share the same fate: we carry within us more love, and above all more longing than today's society is able to satisfy. We have all ripened for something, and there is no one to harvest the fruit . . .
>
> Karl Mannheim (1922)

In September 1919 the Italian poet Gabriele D'Annunzio, accompanied by two thousand Italian mutineers, occupied the Adriatic town of Fiume. The writer and war hero, one of the most famous Europeans of his time, had long wanted to capture all the territories that he believed had always been part of 'Mother Italy'. In 1911 he had zealously supported Italy's invasion of Libya, an expedition whose savagery stoked outrage across the Muslim world. Amid the chaos at the end of the First World War, and with the collapse of the region's previous ruler, D'Annunzio saw a chance to realize his dream of rejuvenating Italian manhood through violence.

Installed as '*il Duce*' of the 'Free State of Fiume', D'Annunzio created a politics of outrageous rhetoric and gestures – politics in the grand style. He invented the stiff-armed salute, which the Nazis later adopted, and designed a black uniform with pirate skull and crossbones, among other things; he talked obsessively of martyrdom, sacrifice and death. Benito

Mussolini and Adolf Hitler, then obscure men, were keen students of the pseudo-religious speeches this shaven-headed man delivered daily on his balcony to his black-shirted 'legionnaires' (before retreating to his sexual partners of the day).

Eager volunteers – testosterone-driven teenagers as well as pedantic socialists – came from places as far away as Ireland, India and Egypt to join Fiume's carnival of erotic militarism. For them, life, devoid of its old rules, seemed to be beginning all over again: a purer, more beautiful and honest existence.

As the months passed, and his sexual appetite and megalomania deepened, D'Annunzio began to see himself leading an international insurrection of all oppressed peoples. In practice, this short-statured man of humble provincial origins, a parvenu who tried to pass himself off as an aristocrat, remained simply an opportunistic prophet for angry misfits in Europe: those who saw themselves as wholly dispensable in a society where economic growth enriched only a minority and democracy appeared to be a game rigged by the powerful.

Frustrated men had defined whole new modes of politics, from nationalism to terrorism, since the French Revolution. Many in France itself had long been affronted by the hideous contrast between the glory of both the revolution and the era of Napoleon and the mean compromises that followed of economic liberalism and political conservatism. Alexis de Tocqueville had repeatedly called for a great energizing adventure: the 'domination and subjugation' of the Algerian people and the creation of a French Empire in North Africa. As the century ended, a trash-talking demagogue called General Georges Boulanger rose swiftly on the back of mass

disgust over moral scandals, economic setbacks and military defeats, and came perilously close to seizing power.

In the 1890s, as the first phase of economic globalization accelerated, xenophobic politicians in France demanded protectionism while targeting foreign workers – angry Frenchmen massacred dozens of Italian immigrant labourers in 1893. White supremacists in the United States had already stigmatized Chinese workers with explicitly racist laws and rhetoric; these were meant, along with segregationist policies against African-Americans, to restore the dignity of a growing number of white 'wage slaves'. Demagogues in Austria-Hungary, who scapegoated Jews for the mass suffering inflicted by the anonymous forces of global capitalism, sought to copy anti-immigrant legislation introduced in America. The Western scramble for Asia and Africa in the late nineteenth century revealed that the political therapy offered by Cecil Rhodes – 'he who would avoid civil war must be an imperialist' – had become increasingly seductive, especially in Germany, which, though successfully industrialized and wealthy, had fostered many angry malcontents and proto-imperialists. At the dawn of the twentieth century, as the world experienced global capitalism's first major crises, and the greatest international migration in history, anarchists and nihilists seeking the liberation of individual will from old and new shackles burst into terroristic violence. They murdered numerous heads of state, including one American president (William McKinley), in addition to countless civilians in crowded public spaces.

D'Annunzio was only one of the many manipulators in a political culture wrought by the West's transition to industrial capitalism and mass politics – what the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, touring the United States in 1916,

called a 'dense poisonous atmosphere of world-wide suspicion and greed and panic'. In Italy, the invasive bureaucracy of the new state, and its brazen indulgence of a rich minority, made the young in particular more vulnerable to fantasies of vengeful violence. As *The Futurist Manifesto*, produced in 1909 by D'Annunzio's admirer the poet Filippo Marinetti, proclaimed:

> We want to glorify war – the world's only hygiene – militarism, patriotism, the destructive act of the anarchists, the beautiful ideas for which one dies, and contempt for women. We want to destroy museums, libraries and academies of all kinds.

For fifteen months in Fiume, D'Annunzio rabble-roused through his experiment in 'beautiful ideas', in contemptuous defiance of all the world's great military powers. His occupation ended tamely, after the Italian navy bombarded Fiume in December 1920, forcing D'Annunzio to evacuate the city. But a whole mass movement – Mussolini's fascism – carried on where he had left off. The poet-imperialist died in 1938, three years after Italy had invaded Ethiopia – a ferocious assault that he predictably applauded. Today, as alienated radicals from all over the world flock to join violent, misogynist and sexually transgressive movements, and political cultures elsewhere suffer the onslaught of demagogues, D'Annunzio's secession – moral, intellectual and aesthetic as well as military – from an evidently irredeemable society seems a watershed moment in the history of our present: one of many enlightening conjunctures that we have forgotten.

Savage violence has erupted in recent years across a broad swathe of territory: wars in Ukraine and the Middle East,

suicide bombings in Belgium, Xinjiang, Nigeria and Turkey, insurgencies from Yemen to Thailand, massacres in Paris, Tunisia, Florida, Dhaka and Nice. Conventional wars between states are dwarfed by those between terrorists and counter-terrorists, insurgents and counter-insurgents; and there are also economic, financial and cyber wars, wars over and through information, wars for the control of the drug trade and migration, and wars among urban militias and mafia groups. Future historians may well see such uncoordinated mayhem as commencing the third – and the longest and strangest – of all world wars: one that approximates, in its ubiquity, a global civil war.

Unquestionably, forces more complex than in the previous two great wars are at work. The violence, not confined to any fixed battlefields or front lines, feels endemic and uncontrollable. More unusually, even this war's most conspicuous combatants – the terrorists – are hard to identify.

Attacks on Western cities since 9/11 have repeatedly provoked the questions: 'Why do they hate us?' and 'Who are *they*?' Before the advent of Donald Trump, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) deepened a sense of extraordinary crisis in the West with its swift military victories, its exhibitionistic brutality, and its brisk seduction of young people from the cities of Europe and America.

ISIS has seemed to pose to many even more perplexing questions than al-Qaeda did. Why, for instance, has Tunisia, the originator of the 'Arab Spring' and the most Westernized among Muslim societies, sent the largest contingent among ninety countries of foreign jihadis to Iraq and Syria? Why have dozens of British women, including high-achieving schoolgirls, joined up, despite the fact that men from ISIS have enslaved and raped girls as young as ten years old, and

have stipulated that Muslim girls marry between the ages of nine and seventeen, and live in total seclusion?

An anonymous writer in *The New York Review of Books*, a major intellectual periodical of Anglo-America, says that 'we should admit that we are not only horrified but baffled' and that 'nothing since the triumph of the Vandals in Roman North Africa has seemed so sudden, incomprehensible, and difficult to reverse'.

Some of the Islam-centric accounts of terrorism have translated into the endless 'global war on terror', and no less forceful – or quixotic – policies aimed at encouraging 'moderate' Muslims to 'prevent' 'extremist ideology', and 'reform' Islam. It has become progressively clearer that political elites in the West, unable to junk an addiction to drawing lines in the sand, regime change and re-engineering native *moeurs*, don't seem to know what they are doing and what they are bringing about.

They have counterbalanced their loss of nerve before the political challenge of terrorism with overreaction, launching military campaigns, often without bothering to secure the consent of a frightened people, and while supporting despotic leaders they talk endlessly of their superior 'values' – a rhetoric that has now blended into a white-supremacist hatred, lucratively exploited by Trump, of immigrants, refugees and Muslims (and, often, those who just 'look' Muslim). Meanwhile, selfie-seeking young murderers everywhere confound the leaden stalkers of 'extremist ideology', retaliating to bombs from the air with choreographed slaughter on the ground.

How did we get trapped in this *danse macabre*? Many readers of this book will remember the hopeful period that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. With the collapse of Soviet Communism, the universal triumph of liberal

capitalism and democracy seemed assured. Free markets and human rights appeared to be the right formula for the billions trying to overcome degrading poverty and political oppression; the words 'globalization' and 'internet' inspired, in that age of innocence, more hope than anxiety as they entered common speech.

American advisors rushed to Moscow to facilitate Russia's makeover into a liberal democracy; China and India began to open up their economies to trade and investment; new nation states and democracies blossomed across a broad swathe of Europe, Asia and Africa; the enlarged European Union came into being; peace was declared in Northern Ireland; Nelson Mandela ended his long walk to freedom; the Dalai Lama appeared in Apple's 'Think Different' advertisements; and it seemed only a matter of time before Tibet, too, would be free.

Over the last two decades, elites in even many formerly socialist countries came to uphold an ideal of cosmopolitan liberalism: the universal commercial society of self-interested rational individuals that was originally advocated in the eighteenth century by such Enlightenment thinkers as Montesquieu, Adam Smith, Voltaire and Kant. Indeed, we live today in a vast, homogeneous world market, in which human beings are programmed to maximize their self-interest and aspire to the same things, regardless of their difference of cultural background and individual temperament. The world seems more literate, interconnected and prosperous than at any other time in history. Average well-being has risen, if not equitably; economic misery has been alleviated in even the poorest parts of India and China. There has been a new scientific revolution marked by 'artificial' intelligence, robotics, drones, the mapping of the human genome, genetic manipulation and cloning, deeper exploration of space,

and fossil fuels from fracking. But the promised universal civilization – one harmonized by a combination of universal suffrage, broad educational opportunities, steady economic growth, and private initiative and personal advancement – has not materialized.

Globalization – characterized by roving capital, accelerated communications and quick mobilization – has everywhere weakened older forms of authority, in Europe's social democracies as well as Arab despotisms, and thrown up an array of unpredictable new international actors, from English and Chinese nationalists, Somali pirates, human traffickers and anonymous cyber-hackers to Boko Haram. The shock waves emanating from the financial crisis of 2008 and Brexit and US presidential elections in 2016 confirmed that, as Hannah Arendt wrote in 1968, 'for the first time in history, all peoples on earth have a common present'. In the age of globalization, 'every country has become the almost immediate neighbour of every other country, and every man feels the shock of events which take place at the other end of the globe'.

The malign minds of ISIS have moved particularly energetically to use this interdependent world to their advantage; the internet in their hands has turned into a devastatingly effective propaganda tool for global jihad. But demagogues of all kinds, from Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan to India's Narendra Modi, France's Marine Le Pen and America's Donald Trump, have tapped into the simmering reservoirs of cynicism, boredom and discontent.

China, though market-friendly, seems further from democracy than before, and closer to expansionist nationalism. The experiment with free-market capitalism in Russia spawned a kleptocratic and messianic regime. It has brought to power explicitly anti-Semitic regimes in Poland and

Hungary. A revolt against globalization and its beneficiaries has resulted in Britain's departure from the European Union, sentencing the latter to deeper disarray, perhaps even death. Authoritarian leaders, anti-democratic backlashes and right-wing extremism define the politics of Austria, France and the United States as well as India, Israel, Thailand, the Philippines and Turkey.

Hate-mongering against immigrants, minorities and various designated 'others' has gone mainstream – even in Germany, whose post-Nazi politics and culture were founded on the precept 'Never Again'. People foaming at the mouth with loathing and malice – such as the leading candidates in the US Republican presidential primaries who called Mexican immigrants 'rapists' and compared Syrian refugees to 'rabid dogs' – have become a common sight on both old and new media. Amid the lengthening spiral of ethnic and sub-ethnic massacre and mutinies, there are such bizarre anachronisms and novelties as Maoist guerrillas in India, self-immolating monks in Tibet, and Buddhist ethnic-cleansers in Sri Lanka and Myanmar.

Grisly images and sounds continuously assault us in this age of anger; the threshold of atrocity has been steadily lowered since the first televised beheading (in 2004, just as broadband internet began to arrive in middle-class homes) in Iraq of a Western hostage dressed in Guantanamo's orange jumpsuit. But the racism and misogyny routinely on display in social media, and demagoguery in political discourse, now reveals what Nietzsche, speaking of the 'men of *ressentiment*', called 'a whole tremulous realm of subterranean revenge, inexhaustible and insatiable in outbursts'.

There is a pervasive panic, which doesn't resemble the centralized fear emanating from despotic power. Rather, it is

the sentiment, generated by the news media and amplified by social media, that anything can happen anywhere to anybody at any time. The sense of a world spinning out of control is aggravated by the reality of climate change, which makes the planet itself seem under siege from ourselves.

This book takes a very different view of a universal crisis, shifting the preposterously heavy burden of explanation from Islam and religious extremism. It argues that the unprecedented political, economic and social disorder that accompanied the rise of the industrial capitalist economy in nineteenth-century Europe, and led to world wars, totalitarian regimes and genocide in the first half of the twentieth century, is now infecting much vaster regions and bigger populations: that, first exposed to modernity through European imperialism, large parts of Asia and Africa are now plunging deeper into the West's own fateful experience of that modernity.

The scope of this universal crisis is much broader than the issue of terrorism or violence. Those routinely evoking a worldwide clash of civilizations in which Islam is pitted against the West, and religion against reason, are not able to explain many political, social and environmental ills. And even the exponents of the 'clash' thesis may find it more illuminating to recognize, underneath the layer of quasi-religious rhetoric, the deep intellectual and psychological affinities that the gaudily Islamic aficionados of ISIS's Caliphate share with D'Annunzio and many other equally flamboyant secular radicals in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the aesthetes who glorified war, misogyny and pyromania; the nationalists who accused Jews and liberals of rootless cosmopolitanism and celebrated irrational violence; and the nihilists, anarchists and terrorists who flourished in almost every continent against a

background of cosy political-financial alliances, devastating economic crises and obscene inequalities.

We must return to the convulsions of that period in order to understand our own age of anger. For the Frenchmen who bombed music halls, cafés and the Paris stock exchange in the late nineteenth century, and the French anarchist newspaper that issued the call to 'destroy' the 'den' (a music hall in Lyon) where 'the fine flower of the bourgeoisie and of commerce' gather after midnight, have more in common than we realize with the ISIS-inspired young EU citizens who massacred nearly two hundred people at a rock concert, bars and restaurants in Paris in November 2015.

Much in our experience resonates with that of people in the nineteenth century. German and then Italian nationalists called for a 'holy war' more than a century before the word 'jihad' entered common parlance, and young Europeans all through the nineteenth century joined political crusades in remote places, resolved on liberty or death. Revolutionary messianism – the urge for a global, definitive solution, the idea of the party as a sect of true believers, and of the revolutionary leader as semi-divine hero – prospered among Russian students recoiling from the cruelty and hypocrisy of their Romanov rulers. Then as now, the sense of being humiliated by arrogant and deceptive elites was widespread, cutting across national, religious and racial lines.

History, however, is far from being repeated, despite many continuities with the past. Our predicament, in the global age of frantic individualism, is unique and deeper, its dangers more diffuse and less predictable.

Mass movements such as Nazism, Fascism and Communism, which claimed to innovatively mobilize collective

energies, led to the wars, genocide and tyrannies of early twentieth-century Europe. But the urge to create a perfect society through communal effort and state power has obviously spent itself in the West and Russia. More importantly, this ideal is extremely weak in 'emerging' powers like China and India; and undermined by selfie individualism even among the fanatical builders of a Caliphate in the Middle East.

In a massive and under-appreciated shift worldwide, people understand themselves in public life primarily as individuals with rights, desires and interests, even if they don't go as far as Margaret Thatcher in thinking that 'there is no such thing as society'. In most of the world since 1945, planned and protected economic growth within sovereign nation states had been the chosen means to broad uplift and such specific goals as gender equality. In the age of globalization that dawned after the fall of the Berlin Wall, political life became steadily clamorous with unlimited demands for individual freedoms and satisfactions.

Beginning in the 1990s, a democratic revolution of aspiration – of the kind Tocqueville witnessed with many forebodings in early nineteenth-century America – swept across the world, sparking longings for wealth, status and power, in addition to ordinary desires for stability and contentment, in the most unpromising circumstances. Egalitarian ambition broke free of old social hierarchies, caste in India as well as class in Britain. The culture of individualism went universal, in ways barely anticipated by Tocqueville, or Adam Smith, who first theorized about a 'commercial society' of self-seeking individuals.

The emphasis on individual rights has heightened awareness of social discrimination and gender inequality; in many countries today, there is a remarkably greater acceptance of

different sexual orientations. The larger political implications of this revolutionary individualism, however, are much more ambiguous. The crises of recent years have uncovered an extensive failure to realize the ideals of endless economic expansion and private wealth creation. Most newly created 'individuals' toil within poorly imagined social and political communities and/or states with weakening sovereignty. They not only suffer from the fact that, as Tocqueville wrote in another context, 'traditional ties, supports and restrictions have been left behind along with their assurances about a person's self-worth and identity'. Their isolation has also been intensified by the decline or loss of postcolonial nation-building ideologies, and the junking of social democracy by globalized technocratic elites.

Thus, individuals with very different pasts find themselves herded by capitalism and technology into a common present, where grossly unequal distributions of wealth and power have created humiliating new hierarchies. This proximity, or what Hannah Arendt called 'negative solidarity', is rendered more claustrophobic by digital communications, the improved capacity for envious and resentful comparison, and the commonplace, and therefore compromised, quest for individual distinction and singularity.

At the same time, the devastating contradictions of a dynamic economic system, which were first manifested in nineteenth-century Europe – bursts of technological innovation and growth offset by systemic exploitation and widespread immiseration – reveal themselves universally. Many of these shocks of modernity were once absorbed by inherited social structures of family and community, and the state's welfare cushions. Today's individuals are directly exposed to them in an age of accelerating competition on uneven playing fields,

where it is easy to feel that there is no such thing as either society or state, and that there is only a war of all against all.

Their evidently natural rights to life, liberty and security, already challenged by deep-rooted inequality, are threatened by political dysfunction and economic stagnation, and, in places affected by climate change, a scarcity and suffering characteristic of pre-modern economic life. The result is, as Arendt feared, a 'tremendous increase in mutual hatred and a somewhat universal irritability of everybody against everybody else', or *ressentiment*. An existential resentment of other people's being, caused by an intense mix of envy and sense of humiliation and powerlessness, *ressentiment*, as it lingers and deepens, poisons civil society and undermines political liberty, and is presently making for a global turn to authoritarianism and toxic forms of chauvinism.

Our perplexity, as simultaneously globalized and oversocialized individuals, is greater since no statutory warning came with the promises of world improvement in the hopeful period after the fall of the Berlin Wall: that societies organized for the interplay of individual self-interest can collapse into manic tribalism, if not nihilistic violence. It was simply assumed by the powerful and the influential among us that with socialism dead and buried, buoyant entrepreneurs in free markets would guarantee swift economic growth and worldwide prosperity, and that Asian, Latin American and African societies would become, like Europe and America, more secular and rational as economic growth accelerated.

According to an ideological orthodoxy, which hardened after the final discrediting of communist regimes in 1989, all governments needed to do was get out of the way of individual entrepreneurs and stop subsidizing the poor and the lazy.

The long, complex experience of strong European and American as well as East Asian economies – active state intervention in markets and support to strategic industries, long periods of economic nationalism, investment in health and education – was elided in a new triumphalist history of free enterprise. Non-governmental organizations as well as the World Bank assumed that the great struggling majority of the world's population would come closer to the living standards of Western Europe and America if they made their economies more liberal, and their world views less inimical to the individual pursuit of happiness. V. S. Naipaul summed up this faith in worldwide Westernization when in a speech at a right-wing think tank in New York in 1990 he hailed the 'pursuit of happiness' through individual enterprise as the final and greatest quest of mankind. 'I find it marvelous,' he said, 'to contemplate, after two centuries and after the terrible history of the first part of the century, that the idea – a mere phrase in the preamble to the American constitution – has come to a universal fruition.' The American passion for happiness 'cannot generate fanaticism', Naipaul assured his America First audience, and 'other more rigid systems, even when religious, in the end blow away'.

During the 'long struggle' against the Soviet Union, such visions of the non-West gradually converging on the liberal-democratic West usefully countered the communist programme of violent revolution. As Naipaul's confidence indicates, they even seemed realizable for a few years after the end of the Cold War. But the schemes of worldwide convergence on the Western model always denied the meaning of the West's own extraordinarily brutal initiation into political and economic modernity.

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