

A history of europe according to the book from the ruins of empire

[History](#), [Empires](#)



Pankaj Mishra's book *From the Ruins of Empire* portrays Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Liang Qichao as overlooked but influential anti-colonial intellectuals. Describe what you see as the important similarities and differences between the two thinkers, and explain how they viewed the gap between Western ideals and Western practices.

Pankaj Mishra considers Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Liang Qichao to be vital figures in world history and direct contributors to Eastern anti-colonial thought despite their tendency to get overshadowed in historical textbooks and scholarship. Advocating for reforms merely a generation apart, al-Afghani and Liang were incredibly similar pan-Eastern thinkers, despite a few major differences. Both saw inherent flaws and contradictions in Western systems of colonial and imperialist power and both fought their entire lives to enact change and prevent Western influence from diminishing the power and culture of the East.

There are a large number of similarities between al-Afghani and Liang. Most basically, both were intellectuals, and both were well-respected intellectuals in their time. Al-Afghani retained a large following no matter where he went, boasting a sizable public presence and gaining real political and social clout throughout the Middle East. Liang "was to become China's first iconic modern intellectual" and was the most famous journalist in China by 25. Both, in addition, specifically opposed and spoke against the Western colonial and imperialist presence in the East. Western colonial governments and influence blocked many of al-Afghani's reform efforts throughout his life. He had to constantly struggle against powers at the top of a large empire

that were trying to suppress change occurring below them. His writings in India “ brought him to the unwelcome attention of the British government,” which sought to stifle his pan-Islamic rhetoric. Liang had similar struggles against Western colonial powers – after a visit to America, he became disillusioned with American influence overseas and began to realize the injustices faced by many Easterners under colonial rule. Finally, neither fully succeeded in enacting reform or achieving their goals. Al-Afghani was never able to reform Islam in the way he had wanted to, ultimately facing the insurmountable challenge of both the old regime of Eastern elites and the oppressive power of Western colonialism. While active, Liang never succeeded in motivating a “ unified resistance to the West” and ultimately ended up being forced into retirement from politics by the Chinese government. His pan-Asian ideas continued to have a following, but they failed to diminish the increasing influence of Western culture on China, Japan, and much of the East. Overall, al-Afghani and Liang were both gifted and respected intellectuals, but both faced insurmountable challenges from the West that prevented them from fully achieving their goals.

There are also important and interesting differences between these two Eastern thinkers. Liang proudly embraced his heritage and made it an integral part of his identity. He was born in Canton, the part of China most exposed to Western influence, and even in exile held on to his Chinese identity and the lessons learned from Western exposure. He published Chinese-language newspapers even in Japan and emphasized his heritage in order to demonstrate his desire for—and the importance of—Chinese

reforms. Al-Afghani, however, adopted a heritage very different than his own and made it part of his identity. He was born “ in north-west Persia” as a Shiite Muslim, but claimed to “ have been a Sunni Muslim from Afghanistan.” As opposed to Liang, al-Afghani hid his true heritage in order to have more appeal – while plenty of Chinese people were from Canton, Persian Shiites were a minority. Al-Afghani disguised his heritage in order to enact reforms, as opposed to Liang, who embraced his heritage to achieve the same goal. Similarly, Liang and al-Afghani sought to reform mildly different things. Liang, while endorsing a pan-Asian set of ideals that endorsed racial equality and strength for all Asian nations in the face of Western colonialism, had a major focus on China. He was a prominent Chinese intellectual and, despite being exiled for much of his life, let his focus rest primarily on his home country. While in Japan, he joined an exile community and continued publishing Chinese-language newspapers that advocated for reform to “ the most secluded of Chinese scholar-gentry.” Al-Afghani, in comparison, was looking to reform all of Islam. His pan-Islamic thought spanned nations and sought to unify people through religious identity instead. He traveled far more extensively than Liang and advocated for pan-Islamic movements all across the Middle East. Overall, though their theories and nationalistic movements were similar, the identities and targets of reform of these two intellectuals made them different.

Despite any differences, Liang and al-Afghani came to similar conclusions about the West. Both ran head-first into Western imperial and colonial powers and realized that, despite the reputation of power and modernity that

these powers had built up, their actual practices in the East did not reflect what they claimed to support. Liang especially was disillusioned by a trip to America and all of the racial discrimination he saw. Ultimately, while neither completely dismissed Western thoughts and practices as pure evil, both thought they were completely unsustainable without thorough reforms. For Liang, democracy needed cultural changes, and for al-Afghani, it needed influence from the bottom of society, not the top. Though neither succeeded in enacting reforms, both saw the limitations and contradictions in the ideals of Western colonial powers and viewed them as lacking without major reforms and readjustments along the way.

Kant, Hegel, Blumenbach, and Darwin were major historical figures who contributed to the development of Western conceptions of race. Choose one of these four and analyze what you consider the central components of his racial theory, tracing its background and sources as well as its influence and legacy.

G. W. F. Hegel, in his essay "Anthropology," argues that humankind can be divided up into five major racial categories. His argument lays out scientific, anthropological facts about the physical characteristics of the races he identifies, differing from primarily aesthetic descriptions of race. Through this anthropological data, he forms an influential racial theory that helped inspire future racial categorizations based on things like skull shape and, while arguing for an arbitrary racial ranking system that dubbed some races inferior, also reflected the seeds of early abolitionist and equal rights movements.

Hegel distinguishes between five main races: Caucasians, Mongols, Ethiopians, Malayans, and Americans. The basis for his argument regarding these distinctions is primarily anthropological: his primary focus in determining race is in the shape of the skull, and he states that the angle formed by lines running horizontally across and vertically down the face are determining factors of race. He also draws from an idea of Blumenbach's that "the greater or less prominence of the cheek-bones" can also distinguish race. He distinguishes Caucasians as having a skull angle of almost 90 degrees, Mongols as having prominent cheekbones, Ethiopians as having jutting lower jaws and bulging foreheads, and both Malayans and Americans as "less sharply distinguished" than the others. Hegel tries very hard to give extensive scientific proof for the difference between races - he essentially gives as much scientific evidence as was available to him at the time. His argument attempts to stem from an empirical standpoint of scientific evidence in order to make it as convincing and objective as possible.

Hegel, however, is not entirely successful in this endeavor. His anthropological data gives way to a study of the mental characteristics of each of the races. It could be argued that Hegel could have also viewed this kind of data as scientific, and in his day they very well may have believed that there was scientific proof for the mental characteristics of different races. However, this data still leans on generalization and speculation about broad swaths of people and is more superficial than anything else. He describes the Ethiopian race as childish and states that "they do not have

an inherent striving for culture.” He describes Mongols as slightly more advanced but also tending to mindlessly “ spread like monstrous locust swarms” across the countryside. Only Caucasians, he says, are capable of the highest mental functions – they are a mind in “ absolute unity with itself.” Hegel’s basis for racial categorizations, therefore, is also mildly aesthetic and superficial – he also explores characteristics like hair color and skin tone in addition to this discussion on mental states. Despite his efforts to remain empirical and scientific, he falls into the established pattern of categorizing races based on subjective mental states and aesthetic appearances like many before him.

Hegel does signify a number of things in the history of racial theory and his impact can be seen in the work of future theorists. Like his contemporary, Blumenbach, Hegel focused on anthropological data and empirical evidence to create a categorization system for the races. This trend differed from thinkers like Bernier and Voltaire – a trend of using measures like skull shape instead of purely aesthetic observations to determine race emerged at this time. Though Hegel still somewhat fell into the aesthetic trend of earlier times, he was at the front of the movement towards using anthropological data to determine race which continued long after him using observations like his and Blumenbach’s. Hegel also made interesting and influential statements about race and superiority. Though he creates a ranking system for the races in which he clearly states that Ethiopians and Mongols are subordinate to Caucasians, whose minds are in unity with themselves, he also states that “ descent offers no ground for granting or denying freedom

and dominion to human beings." Hegel's racial theory sets up a hierarchy of races and establishes some races as clearly inferior to others, but he also espouses a strong anti-slavery position. As contradictory as this may seem, it's hard to deny the importance of statements like these. Despite conflicts with Hegel's internal consistency over race and the value of human beings, it's obvious that there was a developing anti-slavery sentiment in the 1830s when Hegel was writing. The legacy of his racial theory is one of conflict and subjective racial hierarchy, but also one of an emerging respect for human rights and incredibly basic understanding of equality. His racial theory is far from those of later years that actually advocated true equality between races, or even lack of need for races like Alain Locke, but he represents the slow turning point of human thought, the seeds of racial justice and equality that would grow very slowly from abolition towards true equality and rights for all.

Go back to the writing exercise we did on the first day of class and re-read what you wrote back then. How has your perspective changed over the past four months? What would you write differently now about the history of Western civilization and about the history of non-Western civilizations? Feel free to draw on readings, lectures, class discussions, and your own personal experiences and reflections.

On the first day of class, I wrote down three facts I knew about the history of several civilizations, including Western civilization, Africa, India, and China. My responses from the first day were very separate and compartmentalized. All of the things I said about the West had nothing to do with Africa, India, or

China, and so with the rest. Were I to write the same responses now, I think that I would write far more interconnected answers. The history of Western civilization is directly connected to that of Africa, India, and China. This class has really shown me that the four did not have some kind of separate, non-convergent timelines, but instead grew and changed with heavy influence from all of the others. None of these civilizations, nor any not mentioned, progressed in a historical bubble, isolated from other cultures. World history is far more interconnected than I'd ever assumed before.

In addition, I think my narrative about Western and non-Western nations would be very different. I wrote very basic facts about each civilization down, but I think I have more detailed, nuanced facts to contribute after this class. Not all of them are good, either - things I know about the history of Western civilization are things like its contribution to the El Niño famines in India, its economic imperialism in China, and its causing of a demographic collapse of the indigenous peoples of Central America, all from Robert Marks's book. The narrative of Western history is not as pure and impressive as what I've learned in the past - there are a lot of feats and accomplishments, but many of these harsh and brutal events go untaught and unnoticed. I know a lot more about our origins, as well. Most of my original responses were facts about more modern history, history of the late 20th century. However, this course and its readings have taught me a lot about the origins of our modern civilization. Marks looks at how the origins of the society we in the West know are different than we've been taught - that the rise of the West was not inevitable and didn't actually last that long. He shows that you can easily

look at the way the West historically treated Eastern civilizations to show how the myth of our inevitable rise came to be, and how damaging our colonial systems of power ended up being on many countries around the world. Pankaj Mishra looks at a similar thing, though slightly later along in time, and really helped me connect the idea of the contingent rise of the West to the parts of history I knew so well, the late 20th century history of the West. I learned a lot about my own implicit assumptions and how history is not as simple as I assumed it was.

One of the best examples of this is my reaction to Lewis and Wigen's "The Myth of Continents." Reading that essay blew my mind - I had never even given the continents a second thought. I assumed that, like so many other things in my life, continents were simply fact. They were large geographic land masses that had been the way they are since splitting off from Pangea. Of course, once I looked at continents as a social construct it made perfect sense. There really isn't much of an objective reason for the way our continents are divided - it's arbitrary. I'd never considered that, and it rocked my world. That concept ended up becoming a bit of a theme for my semester - a challenge to my implicit assumptions. Most of it makes perfect sense as well - Marks's idea that the West was not somehow fated to rule the world, Arnold's assertion that history is a debate and not set in stone, even Dunbar-Ortiz's claim that the indigenous people of America need their land restored in order to repair damages done to them. These are all arguments that make perfect sense to me - I agree with all of them, and except for the last one, I can see how each easily and realistically applies to

the world I live in. However, I had never considered them before this semester. I made implicit assumptions that I never even bothered to question. This class, at its most basic, helped me question if the things I was certain I knew were things I really knew or just things I assumed were true because of my culture but had never actually looked at or evaluated.

Overall, this course has caused me to think extensively about the place of my civilization in the world. There's an implicit assumption that the West is the pinnacle of society and always has been. While some of the bad parts of our history are taught to us, our history is primarily a story of success and overcoming insurmountable odds. It's also highly isolated - American history is seen as completely different than European history, with only minor crossovers. I've gained an increased perspective of how my history is connected to the history of peoples all over the world and how I can't ignore their contributions to the shaping of my history or how my civilization shaped their history. This expanded view outside of the traditional Western mindset has been mind-blowing at times, and overall has made me a lot more receptive of outside ideas. Primarily, though it hasn't cured me of implicit assumptions, I think it's at least made me aware of some that I do possess and how to identify the others. With this awareness, I can start to move towards a more global consciousness and truly understand the full history of the world, not just from the Western perspective, but from the perspective of all people.