

At home: Steven Pinker

Annie Maccoby Berglof . FT.com ; London (Dec 14, 2012).

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FULL TEXT

Steven Pinker, the Canadian experimental psychologist and author, presents a friendly front. A receptionist in the Harvard psychology department where he teaches describes him as "gentle". And amid the high-strung Harvard world of academic divas and their curt assistants, he is unusual in arranging his own interviews, and warmly welcomes visitors to his loft apartment in Boston.

Yet in print, Pinker, 58, who shot to stardom 18 years ago with his first bestseller, *The Language Instinct*, has not hesitated to attack what he considers to be decades of prevailing views by arguing that human nature is not shaped by culture but is a function of brain design and natural selection. "Evolution is an indispensable component of any satisfying explanation of our psychology. The human mind is not a blank slate," says Pinker, who wrote a book with the same title, and has played a key role in adding evolutionary theory to the study of our mental life, from emotions to decision-making and how we acquire language.

Armed with a mug of tea, Pinker seats himself on a contemporary, Danish-designed sofa in the middle of his open-plan loft to discuss his most recent book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, which makes surprising claims about our species: that we've become gentler and less aggressive than our ancestors. The proof, argues Pinker, is in comparative statistics on violence so convincing that not even two world wars can dent the evidence.

"Conventional wisdom is that we're living in violent times. The data sets say otherwise. Contrary to stereotyping - and I've confirmed the stereotype in a survey - the Middle Ages were much bloodier."

The apartment, a converted leather warehouse where Pinker lives with his third wife, the novelist and philosopher Rebecca Goldstein, is located a few blocks from Boston's financial district. "This was once an industrial space. There were tanneries in the area," says Pinker. Divided into three rooms, it has 14ft-high ceilings and exposed brick walls. The supporting beams in the main room are from the original 19th-century construction. "They are nine inches across. You would be unlikely to see construction like this today," he adds.

The building has an intriguing past. Pinker's former sister-in-law once lived here. "She was here illegally," Pinker says. "She was a painter and her partner was a sculptor. They put in their own plumbing. At some point the developers came in, young urban professionals started pricing them out and by sheer coincidence, decades later, we bought an apartment here, by which point all the artists had been driven out. This is a common urban sequence."

Pinker and Goldstein bought the property in 2006. During our tour Pinker points out some of the building's other mechanical features. "We have a bunch of industrial gear work," he says, showing me a corner of Goldstein's study. "This was the freight elevator. They've left in the pulleys."

The loft's industrial interiors may feel familiar to Pinker, whose grandparents emigrated from Poland and Moldova to Canada in 1926 and forged careers in the garment industry. "In Montreal, my grandfather worked for the Arrow shirt factory and lost his job. So he opened up his own cottage industry making ties, Metropolitan Crevette. It

started in his living room and then a small factory in downtown Montreal. My grandmother was in charge of the seamstresses. Many Jewish immigrants resorted to working with schmatah, or literally, rags. It's a whimsical term for clothes."

Growing up, Pinker was exposed to the rapidly evolving technology of small manufacturing. "The factory had treadle-operated sewing machines, but by the time I was a child it was all electric. I would see my grandfather with stacks of fabrics and he would cut out the ties himself."

Pinker studied experimental psychology at McGill before heading to Harvard for a PhD in cognitive psychology. "We could cross-register at MIT. So I took courses and ended up teaching there." As a young MIT researcher, Pinker was drawn to the budding field of cognitive science. "It's an attempt to understand the mind through linguistics, philosophy of mind, artificial intelligence. There's also the interest in the brain which comes from neuroscience," says Pinker, who directed the MIT Center for Cognitive Neuroscience from 1994 to 1999.

Pinker is a keen photographer, and an entire wall is devoted to shots of Cape Cod and the California coast. "I really like to explain how things work," he says, calling my attention to pairs of photographs on the kitchen wall. "You'll need this," he says, handing me a stereo-viewer. "In the 1990s I was walking by the Harvard Coop and saw one of those magic eye stereograms [in the window]. I said to myself, if I can't figure out how this works, I don't deserve to call myself a psychologist." So did he figure it out? "Yes, and I included a chapter in my book *How the Mind Works* on visual perception. Here the flowers take on a depth that hints at the mechanics of perception."

Today Pinker spends time organising not just images but words: "I'm the chair of the usage panel of the American Heritage Dictionary ... that keeps track of changing norms in usage, meanings and grammatical constructions," he says. "People are under the impression that dictionaries legislate language. What a dictionary does is keep track of usages over time." He was also involved in the development of Ngram, a website created by graduate students Erez Lieberman Aiden and JB Michel, where users can trace words over time. "It uses the Google books corpus. You type in a word and track it. It's a data set that can be used to study how language changes."

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The tabular content relating to this article is not available to view. Apologies in advance for the inconvenience caused. >Can Pinker describe our drift towards gentleness, if there is one, as a product of evolution? "In general, I use the word 'evolution' only to explain the origins of human nature. I don't argue that these positive developments consist of 'evolution' in the biologist's sense of changing gene frequency over generations." says Pinker. "Our institutions have reduced the appeal of violence."

He cites democratic government as one of the best safeguards against aggression. "It's more effective to have government be your avenging angel than to carry out revenge yourself. This is a finding from psychology. Everyone thinks that their own aggression is justified as retaliation. The most violent places today are those that have reverted to anarchy."

Then how to explain why some genocide, like the Balkan atrocities of the 1990s, came out of democratic governments? "I rely on data-sets that look at patterns over time. The democracy in the Balkan republics was recent and shallow. It's stable democracies that reduce war and genocide. New and unstable democracies have higher rates of violence." Pinker says that free speech also cuts down on violence. "A common denominator of dictatorship is that armoured thugs take over government and silence critics."

Pinker will take a stab at shaping free speech himself with his next project - a language style manual. "It will be rooted in cognitive science and linguistics. How does the human mind process language word by word as it tries to understand a sentence? How can our thoughts be put into clear and stylish prose?" So, will he urge fellow academics to clean up their jargon-cluttered prose? "Yes. It will be in the tradition of Strunk and White [The

Elements of Style]."

We return to the sofa and those two opposing human traits: gentleness and aggression. Given continual violent outbreaks around the globe, isn't aggression still part of our deepest nature, the terrible cost of our Darwinian success?

"There's a misconception that survival of the fittest means survival of the most aggressive. The adjective 'Darwinian' used to refer to ruthless competition; you used to read that in business journals. But that's not what Darwinian means to a biologist; it's whatever leads to reproductive success," he says. "It can also mean co-operation ... I don't think aggression works like thirst or sleep. I think aggression is more elicited by particular situations. I think it can be mitigated."

Credit: By Annie Maccoby Berglof

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