

Humanitarianism without illusions  
Samuel Brittan: Financial Times 27/09/02

Take two blindingly obvious propositions:-

1 There is such a thing as human nature and this needs to be taken into account in all attempts to reform society. Theologians call it Original Sin, but you do not have to be religious to take the point.

2 There are also innate differences between individuals which cannot be wiped out by education, income redistribution or anything else.

You might think that these are hardly worth discussing. The American cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker met this reaction when he told colleagues that he was working on his just published book, *The Blank Slate* (1). That was also my own reaction. Yet I was soon disabused. The Standard Social Science Model which denies these propositions has still not vanished. It still seems impossible to study human behaviour objectively without being accused of every kind of barbarity or of the distorted form of Darwinism which Nazi Germany and the Apartheid regime in South Africa used to justify their policies.

Direct evidence turned up the other night when I was listening to a discussion of Pinker's book on the usually staid BBC Radio Three programme *Night Waves*. Pinker aroused the ire of the British psychologist, Oliver James who espoused the widespread view that children who had been brought up violently tended to become violent parents themselves. Pinker argues that this could be because violent tendencies are inherited. Of course, it is not all in the genes; but the main environmental influences on children come from their peers rather than their parents.

These contentions infuriated James who tried to ask four times if Pinker had read certain studies. Pinker had a methodological objection to the genre on which James was relying. He also said that James kept on interrupting him and did not give him a chance to reply. As a listener, I put some of the blame on this embarrassing episode on the presenter who kept on trying to move on the discussion by saying "Locked horns will get us nowhere." The programme would have been better if the two had been allowed to engage directly. It all ended with James shouting that evolutionary psychology flourished in right wing periods and exclaiming "You call Blair left wing!"

Of course, I am not an expert on statistical studies of twins and siblings, which involve controversies all too reminiscent of econometrics. But I have learned that a new study subsequent to Pinker's book, showed that physically abused children are more likely to become antisocial. But this applies only to a minority who have a certain genetic mutation. So you cannot get rid of the innate factor.

As a matter of fact, I have over several decades shown quiet but persistent opposition to the disgusting habit of corporal punishment still so rife in schools in parts of the English-speaking world - and I actually agree with the gist of James's own suggestions on child-rearing (2). What however infuriated me was to hear Pinker accused of encouraging child abuse. Throughout his book he reminds people of the Scottish philosopher David Hume's demonstration that no ought proposition follows from any factual or logical assertion.

The argument he uses against cruelty to children is not just that they might in turn be cruel to their own children, but that it causes unnecessary misery here and now. What he writes is "Child rearing is above all an ethical responsibility. It is not OK for parents to beat, humiliate, deprive or neglect their children, because those are awful things for a big strong person to do to a small helpless one." But if you want a more cynical reason, he quotes another writer: "Be nice to your kid when he's young so that he will be nice to you when you are old."

*The Blank Slate* is fascinatingly written with illustrations going well beyond biology. Pinker must have an enviably mastery of the Internet to tap into so many different subjects. Although the publisher might have thought the title would make it a blockbuster, in my view it does the book less than justice. For most of it is concerned not with rebutting the blank slate, but with a positive attempt to synthesize research on mind, brain, genes and evolution.

I was particularly attracted by the fact that Pinker has not confined his conclusions to feminism and sex differences on which so many writers on this subject concentrate, but has moved into areas such as political psychology and the anatomy of group hatreds on which I feel better able to comment.

He would probably accept that what he has to say does not differ from the wiser conclusions of experienced diplomats and historians. Evolutionary psychology has yet to make its distinctive contribution to a more peaceful world. But it does help to state the problems more clearly and to evaluate the rival theories of humanist scholars.

Inevitably I have some quibbles. For instance Pinker reaffirms the right-left axis. Someone who favours a strong military is (in the US) likely to favour judicial restraint, be attached to religion, against sexual laxity, tough on crime and in favour of lower taxes. As the author asks, "Why on earth should people's beliefs about sex predict their beliefs about the size of the military? What does religion have to do with tax?" Both left and right are full of contradictions. The left is permissive about sexual behaviour but not about business practices. Conservatives want to preserve communities and traditions but also favour the free market economy that subverts them.

Moreover these clusters of views have not always held together historically. In the early 19th century for instance free market doctrines were the province of radical liberals and it was conservatives who espoused - as some of them still do - agricultural protection and a strong state. It is indeed highly artificial to rank attitudes on a single dimension corresponding to the seating of delegates to the French Revolutionary Assembly of 1789.

My own investigations some time ago (3) suggested that there are indeed left-right relationships, but that they are rather weak (the correlation coefficient are normally less than 0.5). So a free market supporter who is not religious or flag-waving need not despair. But he may find himself having arguments with his own side.

Pinker argues that the seemingly disparate attitude making up the political right are linked by what he calls the "Tragic Vision". The ones making up the left belong to the "Utopian Vision": adherents believe that human nature changes with social circumstances, so traditional institutions have no inherent value. Pinker himself, although he has some left of centre attitudes, believes that the "Tragic Vision" more nearly conforms to human nature.

This will do as a starting point, but does not apply in many cases. For instance Milton Friedman is put squarely among the upholders of the "Tragic Vision". Yet his best friends would concede that the "Tragic Vision" is just what he lacks. His writings assume that if only we could abandon statist illusions and establish free markets, democracy and the rule of law, the human future would be bright indeed. On the other side of the Atlantic, Tony Blair, however much he may now be abused on the left, clearly has much more the Utopian-messianic than the Tragic vision of human possibilities.

Pinker himself believe believes that the left-right gap is narrowing because both sides are being forced to accept evolutionary psychology. The left wing belief that human nature can be changed at will and the right wing belief that morality rests on a god-given material soul are giving way to more scientific attitudes. He therefore predicts that political differences will increasingly cut across the old divides and will instead depend on differing weights to different aspects of human nature or to pragmatic assessments of the consequences of alternative actions.

By an interesting coincidence, the "Tragic View", in a highly non-religious version, has been taken to its ultimate by the English political philosopher John Gray in his new book *Straw Dogs* (4). No two writers could be more different in style. Pinker relies on experiments and statistics, leavened with extracts from his favourite writers and some old Jewish jokes. Gray relies mainly on quotations, not only from writers and philosophers, but also on neuroscientists. The result is more a French type series of *pensées* than a consecutive argument. Normally I am allergic to such a literary form, but in this case it comes off.

Gray relentlessly exposes the wishful desire of most philosophers to say that human beings are not animals - and violent ones - which they so clearly are. Indeed he goes further than Pinker in asserting - quite correctly - that human beings are not alone in possessing consciousness. I would add that the evidence of its existing in say cats and dogs is very similar to that for supposing that it exists in human minds other than one's own.

In previous works Gray embraced in turn almost every modern political ideology, only to denounce them as vigorously as he had previously supported them. This time he spurns them all, including, I am glad to say, the moth-eaten eternities of the mystics. Voltaire argued that we should cultivate our own garden. Gray who concludes "Other animals do not need a purpose in life... Can we not think of the aim of life as being simply to see?"

Pinker too exposes the moralistic fallacy that healthy, rational people will not injure others. Indeed human violence does not have to be a disease for it to be worth combating. If anything, it is the belief that violence is an aberration that is dangerous, because it lulls us into forgetting how easily violence may erupt in quiescent places. Unfortunately anyone using the word violence and biology in the same paragraph may be put under a cloud of suspicion for racism.

There have been well known university studies which show how all too easy it is to get students to impose brutal punishments on each other even in an experimental situation. Pinker was particularly influenced as a teenager by the outbreak of criminal violence on a day when the Montreal police went on strike. From boyhood onwards men divide themselves into coalitions that compete aggressively. Worst of all they force others into an aggressive posture in self-defence. The question is not why children are aggressive but how they learn not to be so. The lion's share of US murders are committed by young men between 15 and 30. Moreover 7 per cent of young men commit 79 per cent of repeated violence offences.

People embrace a morality that usually does not embrace all human beings but only the members of their own clan, village or tribe. History and ethnography suggests that people can treat strangers the way we now treat lobsters. In early societies between 10 and 60 per cent of men died at the hands of other men.

Studies of warfare in primitive societies have confirmed that men do not have to be short of food or land to wage it. One factor in why some countries are more willing to wage war than others is that they have a much higher proportion of the population consisting of men in that wage group. Saudi Arabia is an obvious instance.

He cites the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes who speaks of human life in conditions of nature as being nasty, brutish and short. There is much evidence that the forces of evolution prepared human beings for violence. Far from being the friendly creatures of romantic imagination, our nearest relation, the chimpanzees are even more violent than homo sapiens.

Yet unlike Gray, Pinker remains an optimistic North American. He pins his hopes for a better future partly on the possibility that human beings will gradually expand their sense of group identity to a greater range of their fellows and partly on the resources of diplomacy and military deterrence.

He believes adjudication by an armed authority to be the most effective general violence reduction technique ever invented. He follows Hobbes in advocating a common power to keep them all in awe. But he adds that civil libertarian concern about abusive police practices is an indispensable counterweight to state monopoly of violence. He admits that no way has yet been found to establish a world authority with an ultimate global monopoly of violence. Meanwhile he supports devices like Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) that prevailed in the Cold War. But how does one apply this remedy to terrorist organisations without a clear cut base, such as Al Qaeda?

Unfortunately I fear that the instinct of human beings to form mutually hostile groups is so deeply embedded that unconventional remedies will be required. If our race is to survive in an era of chemical and biological warfare we will need not just genetically modified foods, but genetically modified human beings. I am well aware that, if maverick scientists jump the gun, the attempt could result in monstrosities. Nor do I need John Gray to remind me of the likelihood that the process will be led by gangster politicians intent on producing robotic slaves. This is all the more reason for civilised people to take the matter seriously instead of mindlessly trying to banish all discussion.

(1) Penguin, 25.

(2) They F\*\*\* You Up, Bloomsbury, 16.99 M,10

(3) Left or Right: The Bogus Dilemma, 1967.  
Capitalism and Permissive Society, London 1973.

(4) Granta Books, 12.99