



Reviews & Essays

Pinker the Prophet

By Robert Jervis

Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking Adult, 2011), 832 pp., \$40.00.

With the United States fighting two wars, countries from Tunisia to Syria either in or on the brink of intrastate conflicts, bloodshed continuing in Sudan and reports that suicide bombers might foil airport security by planting explosives within their bodies, it is hard to be cheerful. But Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker tells us that we should be, that we are living in the least violent era ever. What's more, he makes a case that will be hard to refute. The trends are not subtle—many of the changes involve an order of magnitude or more. Even when his explanations do not fully convince, they are serious and well-grounded.

Pinker's scope is enormous, ranging in time from prehistory to today and covering wars (both international and civil), crime, torture, abuse of women and children, and even cruelty to animals. This breadth is central because violence in all of these domains has declined sharply. Students of any one of these areas are familiar with a narrow slice of the data, but few have stepped back to look at the whole picture. In fact, many

Robert Jervis is the Adlai E. Stevenson Professor of International Politics at Columbia University.

scholars and much of the educated public simply deny the good news. But prehistoric graves and records from twentieth-century hunter-gatherers reveal death rates due to warfare five to ten times that of modern Europe, and the homicide rate in Western Europe from 1300 to today has dropped by a factor of between ten and fifty. When we read that after conquering a city the ancient Greeks killed all the men and sold the women and children into slavery, we tend to let the phrases pass over us as we move on to admire Greek poetry, plays and civilization. But this kind of slaughter was central to the Greek way of life.

Implicit throughout and explicit at the very end is Pinker's passionate belief that contemporary attacks on the Enlightenment and modernity are fundamentally misguided. Critics often argue that material and technical progress has been achieved without—or even at the cost of—moral improvement and human development. Quite the contrary, he argues; we are enormously better than our ancestors in how we treat one another and in our ability to work together to build better lives.

To make such bold and far-reaching claims, one must draw on an equally vast array of sources. And so Pinker does. The bibliography runs to over thirty pages set in small type, covering studies from anthropology, archaeology, biology, history, political science, psychology and sociology. With this range comes the obvious danger of superficiality. Has he understood all this material? Has he selected only those sources that support his claims? Does he know the limits of the studies he draws on? I cannot answer

these questions in all the fields, but in the areas I do know—international relations and some psychology—his knowledge holds up very well. With the typical insider’s distrust of interlopers, I was ready to catch him stacking the deck or twisting arguments and evidence about war. While he does miss some nuances, these are not of major consequence. It is true that despite the enormous toll of World Wars I and II, not only have there been relatively few massive bloody conflicts since then (and an unprecedented period of peace among the major powers), but the trends going back many centuries reveal a decline in

the frequency of war, albeit not a steady one. The record on intrastate conflicts is muddier because definitions vary and histories are incomplete, but most studies reveal a decline there as well. In the aftermath of the Cold War, civil wars broke out in many areas, and some still rage (most obviously in Congo), but, contrary to expectations, this wave has subsided. In parallel, Pinker marshals multiple sources using different

methodologies to show that however much we may fear crime, throughout the world the danger is enormously less than it was centuries ago. When we turn to torture, domestic violence against women, abuse of

children and cruelty to animals, the progress over the past two millennia is obvious. Here what is particularly interesting is not only the decline in the incidence of these behaviors but also that until recently they were the norm in both the sense of being expected and of being approved.

In all these diverse areas, then, I think Pinker’s argument holds up. Or, to put it more cautiously, the burden is now on those who believe

that violence has not declined to establish their case. (Whether our era sees new and more subtle forms of violence is a different question and I think would have to involve the stretching of this concept.) We often scorn “mere” description, but here it is central. The fact—if it is accepted as a fact—that violence has declined so much in so many forms changes the way we understand our era and the sweep of human history. It



shows how much our behavior has changed and that even if biology is destiny, destiny does not yield constant patterns. It also puts in perspective our current ills and shows that notions of civilization and progress are not mere stories that we tell ourselves to justify our lives.

So why has all this good news generally gone unrecognized, and why do many people believe that our age is unprecedented in its bloodiness? One reason Pinker notes is the tendency to whitewash history. Myths of a better time in the past and portrayals of our current era as degraded are common among social critics on both the left and right to goad us into shame—and action. Our understanding of the massive slaughter and oppression levied by the dominance of the Western world over less modern civilizations has magnified this propensity, and stressing how much violence there was in earlier times, and in some contemporary non-Western societies, seems to stereotype Others as barbarians. Ironically, the liberal worldview that Pinker credits with so much of our progress involves a sensitivity to our current and previous sins that encourages viewing distant societies such as the American Indians not only more favorably than we did until recently but also more favorably than is warranted.

Related to this, the somewhat cynical spirit of our age makes us suspicious of claims about progress in human behavior, especially because the plethora of such claims by Western thinkers like Herbert Spencer and even Max Weber in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries failed to

foresee the cataclysms that were to come and appeared to justify the dominance of racism and sexism around the world. It is all too easy for any of us to imagine how we could be ridiculed, generations from now, for our naïveté and unwitting complicity in a new malign order.

The recent past too seems to make a mockery of Pinker's argument. Just to mention the names of Hitler, Stalin and Mao is to make us cringe at the thought of progress. Although the world has seen nothing so horrific since then, readers of this journal will be familiar with the wars between Iran and Iraq and between Eritrea and Ethiopia, and any day's newspaper reveals numerous incidents of bloodshed. Since they are happening now, they are very vivid, which makes it hard to maintain a sense of proportion. Reading about the latest school massacre or serial killer grabs our attention more than the drab long-run statistics. Even if we are aware of the terrors of the distant past, we do not feel them in our gut.

The wars of the twentieth century and the domestic mayhem caused by those tyrannical leaders will lead many to ask how previous eras could conceivably have witnessed as many casualties at the hands of oppressors or at the point of a gun. Well, they didn't. But Pinker argues that what is important for understanding social processes is not the absolute number of deaths but their proportion of the world's population, which has greatly increased over time. To some, this will seem like a sleight of hand. In what way do tens of millions of deaths in wars and attempts to remake

The fact—if it is accepted as a fact—that violence has declined so much in so many forms changes the way we understand our era and the sweep of human history.

societies become less significant because of the rise of world population, including in continents far distant from these atrocities? Morally, they do not. But if one wants to use body counts as a way to understand the extent of violence in the world, proportions and ratios are a better measure than absolute numbers.

Is it also appropriate to point to the lack of a war between the United States and the USSR as evidence of growing peacefulness? The Cold War of course saw American troops fighting in Korea and Vietnam, not to mention numerous smaller proxy wars. These were not large enough to move the needle on Pinker's scale, but a nuclear war would have been. Pinker briefly notes many of the arguments for why this did not occur, but to the extent that peace was maintained by the fear of total annihilation, one can certainly question how we should enter this period into our balance sheet. If we think that we were playing Russian roulette, then the fact that we were lucky does not count quite so strongly for our living in a less violent time.

An awareness that massive war could still break out today similarly inhibits our sense of progress. Without a true rival state to the United States, the specter of world-destroying conflict has disappeared, but even optimists agree that there is at least some chance of a Sino-American war, and the danger of a nuclear exchange between other hostile pairs, most obviously India and Pakistan—but also Israel and a nuclear-armed Iran—cannot be dismissed. These perils remind us that progress always comes with costs: no splitting of the atom, no nuclear holocaust.

And this makes us resist Pinker's analysis.

Most broadly, we see less progress than we should because we are prone to what can be called the conservation of fears. If through effort or good fortune the problem we worry most about disappears, all the others move up a notch. Terrorist incidents were frequent during the Cold War, and although they did not kill as many people as did 9/11, they were a significant concern for citizens and policy makers. But no one suggested that this was a menace of sufficient magnitude to merit making it the pivot of American foreign policy, let alone the center of societal concerns. We are now so worried about terrorism because our security environment is otherwise so benign. The fact that we no longer have to live under the shadow of instantaneous destruction has much less impact on our psyches and sense of how dangerous our world is than logic would suggest.

Pinker wants to do more than document the decline of violence; he wants to explain it. And that explanation comes in two forms: a "Civilizing Process" that reduced violence, especially within states, and a "Humanitarian Revolution" that extended rights not only to different races, but also to women and children. (The two processes have some overlap, and growing humanitarianism probably would have been impossible without the earlier evolution away from barbarism and toward gentility, but they nevertheless remain distinct.)

Civility, for Pinker, was promoted to a great extent by the rise of the state in early modern Europe. It is a Hobbesian notion

that statistics from nonstate societies confirm: without law supported by sufficient power, both self-defense and self-aggrandizement produce a violent world. The data are quite clear that the development of a state structure is associated with a sharp decline in homicides. Here and elsewhere, Pinker is quick to note that correlation

a vital concern today: How do we devise it so that the government is strong enough to maintain order and guarantee rights without being so strong and independent as to be a menace to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness?

The second major civilizing impulse is the development of commerce. A fun-



does not necessarily mean causation, but both logic and chronology indicate a significant role for state power in quelling violence.

Still, as Aesop noted in his fable of King Log and King Stork (one of the few sources that Pinker does not cite), a strong government can kill, and a decline in homicide can be more than compensated for by an increase in state-sponsored killing. Pinker acknowledges this, but I do not think fully takes on board the central problem of government that has preoccupied so many thinkers, that underpinned the American Constitution and that remains

damental intellectual breakthrough was the understanding that economic activities were not zero-sum and that uncoerced trade was mutually beneficial. Trade also provided potential income streams for states and flourished when ruling parties could provide internal order. Thus while Columbia scholar Charles Tilly was correct to say that “war made the state, and the state made war,” one too could say this about commerce.

To these well-known elements Pinker adds the insights of the historical sociologist Norbert Elias who showed how the development of royal courts led to forms of

civilization that we now take for granted—table manners (including not brandishing knives that all too easily could be used to stab food, as well as one’s neighbor), not spitting, along with defecating and copulating only in private. Much of the evolution of etiquette and manners made social interactions more predictable and reinforced self-control and the need to delay gratifications, practices that made sense when being hot-blooded was likely to reduce rather than increase wealth, standing and security.

How convincing is this? The obvious objection is that it amounts to explaining history with history; that it describes more than it enlightens. Pinker acknowledges that these mechanisms are all deeply intertwined and that proof is impossible. In dealing with such large and complex phenomena, plausibility may be all that we can hope for, and Pinker’s argument and evidence do meet this test. And his willingness to include anomalies in his explanation is admirable. But it is his desire to do so that also provides grounds for skepticism. Pinker argues that the uptick in domestic violence in the West, and especially in the United States in the late 1960s and 1970s, can be explained by a temporary “decivilizing process.” The increase in homicides and crime was caused, he argues, by a decrease in respect for authority, a rise in self-indulgence, a scorn for self-discipline and other “bourgeois values,” and a renunciation of the belief that societies are held together by a willingness to respect others. The fact that those of us who participated—even marginally—in these activities remember

the condescending diatribes of our elders along these same lines does not mean that Pinker is incorrect. But his case would be stronger if he could show that the marchers and protesters and anti-Vietnam War brigades were the ones responsible for the increased violence. It is also hard to rule out the possibility that both the social turmoil and the rise in crime were brought about by third factors, most obviously the dislocation and diversion of resources caused by the war and the heightened sense on the part of many young and educated people that Western social institutions had failed to live up to the Enlightenment values on which they were founded. Indeed, the 1960s and ’70s witnessed a great expansion of rights and the reinvigoration of social inquiry that Pinker sees as an engine of progress. And while Pinker attributes the subsequent decline in crime to a return to the earlier norms, the drastic increase in the incarceration rate (which many consider to be uncivilized) may have had something to do with it.

What Pinker calls the “Humanitarian Revolution” involved a recasting of normal and appropriate human behavior. Part of our historical and biological heritage, we now see torture, slavery, and sanctioned violence against women, children and others who were powerless in society, and often against those who held different political and religious beliefs, as repugnant. The world became not only safer but also more humane.

The cause, Pinker tells us, was the growth of literacy, writing and publishing. “Read-

ing is a technology for perspective-taking. When someone else's thoughts are in your head, you are observing the world from that person's vantage point," which leads to at least a degree of empathy. Furthermore, exposure to a wider range of people, thoughts and events "is the first step toward asking whether [current practices] could be done in some other way." Fiction as well as nonfiction can serve this purpose, and the mid- and late-eighteenth century witnessed an explosion of novels. With the Enlightenment, more and more ideas were exchanged through letters and discussions in increasingly cosmopolitan cities. Such exchanges are crucial, according to Pinker, and lest I be accused of caricaturing his claim for how they lead to progress, let me give an extended quotation:

When a large enough community of free, rational agents confers on how a society should run its affairs, steered by logical consistency and feedback from the world, their consensus will veer in certain directions. Just as we don't have to explain why molecular biologists discovered that DNA has four bases . . . we may not have to explain why enlightened thinkers would eventually argue against African slavery, cruel punishments, despotic monarchs, and the execution of witches and heretics. With enough scrutiny by disinterested, rational, and informed thinkers, these practices cannot be justified indefinitely.

The later and parallel rights revolutions over the past thirty years (greater rights for racial minorities, gays, women, children and even animals) were similarly rooted in "technolo-

gies that made ideas and people increasingly mobile. . . . [and led to] a debunking of ignorance and superstition. . . . [and] an increase in invitations to adopt the viewpoints of people unlike oneself."

It is the free flow of ideas, unrestrained by dogmas, that is doing the work for Pinker. Nevertheless, much as this idea is appealing to academics and intellectuals, skepticism is in order. We have come to see slavery as a violation of our values and sense of what it means to be human, but one does not have to be a Marxist to doubt that this was the inevitable consequence of free inquiry (it certainly was not in the United States). Pinker displays a great faith—although he would dislike that word—in the ability of social science (he does not like current trends in the humanities) to lead us toward not only a better understanding of the human condition but also the betterment of it. I love reading and doing social science, but think we should be wary about overclaiming. Empathy, for Pinker's account, may lead naturally (but not inevitably) to at least a degree of do-unto-others-as-you-would-have-them-do-unto-you behavior. But Pinker realizes that one can see the world through someone else's eyes and still want to harm him, and also appreciates that research on the effects and, even more, the causes of empathy and sympathy are necessarily limited because of the difficulty in constructing appropriate experiments, without which it is hard to move beyond correlation. Since kindergarten, most Americans have been taught to be empathetic, and human-subjects boards would likely object to manipulations that

would try to make them less so. And even good knowledge can be put to bad ends. It is not necessarily true that all good things go together; more knowledge might lead us in directions that Pinker and I would deplore. For example, we could learn that capital punishment does indeed deter murder or that genetic endowments help explain why there are so few women in the ranks of top mathematicians. Pinker does realize that knowledge is not the same as enlightenment—no country was more educated than Nazi Germany—but does not consider whether an open society might democratically decide to close off certain avenues of thought.

So dogma, the antithesis of open inquiry, is Pinker's *bête noire*, embodied above all in religion, which he associates with intolerance and superstition. There is no doubt that religion has often contributed to evil, and as a nonbeliever myself I have trouble empathizing with those who think they can understand the will of God. But we should give the Devil his due: many anti-war and human-rights movements have deep religious

roots, and much of the energy behind campaigns that Pinker and I applaud comes from people who feel a higher calling to help their fellow human beings. (Pinker's one paragraph addressing this only scratches the surface of the question.)

Pinker is on firmer ground on other crucial points related to knowledge. The first is that the reduction of violence and the expansion of humane treatment of people has been spurred by the conscious decision to design incentives and institutions to these ends. The growth of commerce and state power may have lowered homicide rates, but only as an unintended by-product; with the Enlightenment, people began to consciously develop arrangements to reduce violence and protect not only their rights

but those of at least some others as well. Here intelligent design works. The circle of empathy can be deliberately increased by measures like liberal education, and the framers of the American Constitution were not alone in seeing that they had to—and could—build institutions that would limit their own power. This is of signal importance.

At its core, this is about self-aware-



ness—an understanding of human nature that can allow us to rein in our inner demons and give our better angels the upper hand. Self-control, so central to the humanizing trends Pinker documents, can be strengthened. If empathy is developed partly through novels, parents can urge their children to read them and school curricula can be developed appropriately. Perspective-taking can be encouraged by foreign travel. Although we should not expect too much from these efforts (indeed they may produce contempt and hostility) and Pinker does not advocate extreme social engineering, he does say that societies function best when they are built on the realization that we are all prone to violence and abuse.

Pinker also points to the role of understanding in overcoming the particularly pernicious psychological bias that he calls the “Moralization Gap.” Individuals and collectivities usually want to think well of themselves. This trait eases our way through a difficult life but causes great problems when conflict arises because we are quick to blame others. Pinker’s coverage of the research on the role of this bias in intergroup and international conflict is a bit thin (something I notice because I have contributed to it), but the basic point is clear and important. Although sometimes those we interact with are indeed responsible for the problem, the immediate assumption that this is the case, and the social and psychological inhibitions against seeing how we may be offending others and infringing upon their legitimate interests, is a major cause of escalating

conflict. Students of international politics know that efforts to gain mutual security can be foiled by the failure of the state to realize that others may see it as a threat, and therefore to interpret their undesired moves as evidence that they are unreasonable and aggressive. Throughout the Cold War, Soviet leaders could not see that their behavior played a large role in their encirclement by enemies; Mikhail Gorbachev’s intellectual breakthrough was to grasp this. Self-knowledge is important and difficult here (religious teachings about our all being sinners can help), but it can also be dangerous. Be too quick to believe that the Other is behaving badly because of what you have done and the lead-up to WWII happens all over again.

Some are likely to see all this as the Whig theory of history decked out in social-science clothes. There is something to this, but Pinker is aware enough to argue that his “is a kind of Whig history that is supported by the facts.” Although he sees deep forces as responsible for much of our progress, he also acknowledges the role of contingency. He might have done more to discuss how these two fit together; could plausible historical counterfactuals have brought us to a very different outcome: Even with the Enlightenment, might full-blown racism have continued in the United States had Gandhi’s campaign of nonviolence not succeeded and World War II not been fought partly in the name of racial equality?

It is the attempt to link so many different types of declines in violence to one

I am not sure he would appreciate the association, but Pinker's argument echoes the motto engraved in the CIA's lobby: "And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free."

another that gives pause. Some links clearly are present. Early struggles to broaden the circle of those who were believed to have inalienable rights led eventually to the civil rights movement, just as it, in turn, contributed to the movements for women's equality and gay rights. But there are problems in applying progress in one area to progress in another. Humanitarian advances do not necessarily lead to more peaceful and understanding relations among states. Nor does more self-control in one individual lead to more self-control across groups of individuals. To his credit, Pinker realizes this is a problem, but his attempts to overcome it through social psychology are less than entirely successful. Pinker explains the decline of homicide and the decline of slavery quite differently, and the decline in war, coming later than the other markers of progress, may be even more distinct. Indeed, the two chapters on this subject do not build upon his previous arguments nor do they provide a foundation for later ones. I do not wish to argue that international politics is entirely a world apart, but wars continued to rage while other kinds of violence declined. Perhaps what changed the incentives for peace and war must be found elsewhere. Similarly, the connection between the decline in intra and interstate wars is loose. International tensions often feed internal violence as outside countries support disputing factions. And civil wars can transmit violence to the international level. I agree with Pinker that some of these trends are of a piece with the decline of domestic violence, especially in the smaller role of honor and the general view that vio-

lence is at best a necessary evil rather than a valued mode of conduct. But it is quite possible to imagine a world in which wars coexist with some measure of domestic peace and humane behavior.

For Pinker, much of what was believed in the more violent eras "can be considered not just monstrous, but in a very real sense, stupid," and

As humans have honed the institutions of knowledge and reason, and purged superstitions and inconsistencies from their systems of belief, certain conclusions were bound to follow, just as when one masters the laws of arithmetic certain sums and products are bound to follow.

Only in societies cut off from the free flow of ideas can enormous moral errors continue to flourish. He realizes that this view seems self-congratulatory but does not seem to see that it holds true only if one accepts contemporary values. His claim that previous beliefs "would not stand up to intellectual scrutiny as being consistent with other values [the people in earlier eras] claimed to hold, and they persisted only because the narrower intellectual spotlight of the day was not routinely shone on them" strains credulity. It implies that if we were transported to those times we could argue our new contemporaries out of their benighted beliefs and practices (assuming we were not killed first). Pinker summarizes the correlations between reasoning and education on the one hand and nonviolence, cooperation and endorsement of individual rights on the other, but methodological

constraints mean that only a few of these studies can make claims for causation, and even those cannot escape the possibility that the results simply show that smarter people are more likely to be socialized into prevailing Enlightenment views. One has to wonder whether those who believed in Fascism in the 1930s or endorsed the burning of witches in the seventeenth century were less able to reason consistently and abstractly than we are.

I am not sure he would appreciate the association, but Pinker's argument echoes the motto engraved in the CIA's lobby: "And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." These claims place too much of a burden on reasoning. After he moves on from the Civilizing Process, Pinker largely leaves material factors behind. Power and interests, costs and benefits play little role. This, I think, is clearly wrong for the decline of war and questionable throughout. He also downplays the ways in which violence can result from reasoning, just as threats and, when necessary, the use of force is deployed to establish and maintain open societies. When these are engaged in war, they are also capable of killing large numbers of enemy civilians, as the United States and the UK did in the bombings of Germany and Japan when they calculated, correctly most historians now believe, that this would help bring victory. Torture also had a return engagement in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Pinker could see progress in the fact that it was quite limited and was justified not only by the pressing circumstances but also by the claim that it

was not torture (and that the United States had the legal opinions to prove this). I agree, and would not argue that we are headed back to the Dark Ages. But this sorry episode, which I think will be repeated if there is another major attack on America, does show that people can reason themselves into cruelty.

So what does Pinker's analysis tell us about the future? He refrains from speculation, noting the role of contingency and statistical distributions with "fat tails"—i.e., unexpected events with large consequences. But this sensible if cautious stance does not sit entirely well with his central argument. If knowledge, reason and the free flow of ideas have brought violence down in the past, they should continue to do so in the future. It would seem highly likely, perhaps even inevitable, that free societies would develop even further where they are established and spread—if at uncertain pace—where dogma now reigns, with the result that the world would be even better in the coming generations. Once stated, this seems too triumphalist if not reminiscent of George W. Bush, but it is to be welcomed both as a vision and a benchmark against which Pinker's argument can be judged by our successors.

In the end, even if Pinker's explanations do not entirely convince and his faith in reason is exaggerated, he has succeeded in documenting the enormous decline in all sorts of violence and cruelty. This achievement of humankind deserves to be better known, and readers of this important book will remember it and ponder its causes. It is a story worthy of seven hundred pages. □

Copyright of National Interest is the property of Center for the National Interest and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.