

LARGELY BECAUSE ITS political integration lags behind its economic coordination, the European Union has been suffering a serious malaise for the past few years. As a result of that economic slowdown, many of the old national and cultural antagonisms have re-emerged and led many to wonder whether the European Union would survive the crisis. If it failed to do so, the dissonance between political and economic integration might prove the undoing of a construction that its founders saw as a means for overcoming the centuries-old rivalry between the French and the Germans (and assorted other former combatants), putting an end to their habit of killing each other in massive numbers in previous decades and centuries. Their vision was nicely if unexpectedly reflected in the recent remark of Heiner Geissler, long-time head of Germany's Christian Democratic Union and a rather tart conservative in his earlier days, that the Victory Column in Berlin that celebrates the Prussian victories over Denmark (1864), Austria (1866), and France in 1871 was the "dumbest memorial" in Germany, "a symbol of nationalism and militarism". Before World War II, at least, German conservatives were not generally given to this sort of view of Germany's past. Clearly, something dramatic has occurred – and not only in Germany. War appears to have gone out of fashion in Europe and Japan, if not necessarily elsewhere. What has happened?

Steven Pinker argues in his latest book, *The Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, that we, as a species, have become less belligerent, more violence-averse. He marshals a mountain of evidence designed to show that, as compared to earlier societies, especially "stateless" ones, we enjoy an historically unprecedented degree of freedom from the risk of violent death. If Pinker is correct, our understanding of the twentieth century as the bloodiest on record, "a century of genocide", needs to be substantially revised. More importantly, our entire view of our place in human history needs to be reconsidered. The image that we live in an age of unexampled atrocities, of previously unparalleled cruelty and inhumanity, must be discarded and in its place we must put a picture of ourselves as peace-loving beneficiaries of the advantages provided by state-governed societies, in which, as Max Weber told us a century ago, the legitimate use of violence is a monopoly of the

* About Stephen PINKER, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York, Viking, 2011).

state. Under such circumstances, to paraphrase a popular American bumper sticker, “if guns are outlawed, only outlaws will have guns”. That is indeed precisely the objective – one that is of course variably realized in different countries around the world, notably the United States. Where it is achieved, according to Pinker, the risk of violent death declines to historically very low levels, and people live lives that are the very opposite of nasty, poor, solitary, brutish, and short.

Pinker is quite self-consciously intervening on the side of Hobbes and against Rousseau in the long-running debate over the ways to stem the human propensity toward violence. Pinker tends to argue that there is a good deal of academic smoothing-over of unsavory evidence with regard to the relative rates of violence among peoples living in pre-state societies. Anthropology, he insists, has tended to be too Rousseauist, naively inclined to view “primitive” groups as benignly pacific despite copious evidence that they were often in fact quite dangerous. Pinker musters the work of Norbert Elias, “the most important thinker you’ve never heard of”, to bolster his claims that the human race – or at least its more fortunate parts – has undergone a dramatic “civilizing process” that has sharply reduced the risk of violent death for those fortunate enough to have lived in its wake. The accessibility of Pinker’s scholarship to a broad public reminds us that, for all the talk of “public sociology” in the United States in recent years, the most successful practitioners of that genre have been located in other fields – political science (Huntington and Putnam) and cognitive psychology (Pinker).

One of the central difficulties in evaluating Pinker’s arguments concerns the quality of the research on which he bases his claims about pre- or non-state societies. Unavoidably, much of this research is of an archeological kind, and bases its findings on fossil and other sorts of remains that are unusually difficult to evaluate. Even when it comes to state-governed societies, reliable records of any significant kind only go back about 200 years at most, so that it is very hard to make the kinds of sweeping claims that Pinker wants to make. Like any good book, however, *Better Angels* has generated considerable controversy and stimulated further efforts to resolve the debate over the extent of violence in earlier societies on the basis of better tools, better evidence, and better interpretations.

The other main difficulty with Pinker’s arguments concerns his measure of violence. The metric that concerns him is the risk of violent death. The claim about the decline of violence in the twentieth century – despite two devastating world wars said to be responsible for perhaps 100 million deaths – thus involves two factors not ordinarily considered

when the period is characterized as “unprecedentedly deadly” or “genocidal”. First, Pinker insists that if we are talking about an entire century, we have to use the entire century as the frame of reference, not just the period of the world wars plus, say, the Armenian genocide; the century consisted of a full 100 years, not only its bloodiest 15 or so years. The second factor in assessing the significance of the twentieth century is that it witnessed an extraordinary expansion of the world’s population, such that the appalling absolute number of deaths during the century’s conflicts turns out to be relatively small, compared to previous centuries, as a proportion of total population.

The counter-intuitive character of Pinker’s book calls forth skepticism, but we must take seriously the arguments he makes. Any account of previous human history is inevitably likely to stress its nasty, bellicose features, and with good reason. Since World War II, however, we have come to take seriously such previously marginal ideas as “human rights”; more recently, we have seen challenges to bullying, the decline of a martial ethos in the world’s richer societies, the defense of animal rights and of the rights of the disabled, the possible demise of American football due to the heightened risk of brain injuries, and much else beside that points to a lessened tolerance for violence. Americans bemoan the deaths of 4,000 soldiers in a decade of military involvement in Afghanistan, yet those numbers are tiny compared, say, to the Vietnam War, in which some 55,000 Americans died in a war in which US participation lasted roughly as long. For a variety of reasons involving the end of conscription and the rise of new military technologies that conduct warfare without large numbers of soldiers, most Americans and Western Europeans, at least, grow increasingly distant from war and tend to find it – like its cousin, hunting – increasingly barbaric. How long this trend will last remains to be seen but, as a characterization of what has happened in history, there is much to the case that Pinker makes.

The skepticism about his arguments arises from two causes, I suspect: one is the tendency on the left to doubt any genuinely good news, and the other is Pinker’s tendency to practise a sort of Enlightenment triumphalism. Pinker is a resolute rationalist, and he has little patience for the Foucauldians and “critical theorists” that inhabit the contemporary academy, whom he regards as unappreciative of the virtues of life in a liberal society. He is particularly unsympathetic to the idea that the Holocaust was an expression of the hypertrophying of reason, *a la* Horkheimer and Adorno or Zygmunt Bauman. The notion that reason might have a perverse side that would undergird genocidal killing is

anathema to him, as it must be to us. Still, one cannot dismiss the extent to which the Nazis mobilized (pseudo-)scientific ideas in their quest for racial purity. Even Plato thought that ethnic homogeneity would be necessary for a successful *polis*; as in a variety of matters, Aristotle chided him by saying that such uniformity would bring only the peace of the graveyard.

Pinker's conclusions in *Better Angels* led to a revealing exchange – first in the pages of the *New York Times*, and subsequently in a face-to-face encounter at the New School – between himself and Robert Jay Lifton, the long-time analyst of the causes and consequences of mass atrocities. Lifton told the *Times* that he had not “experienced the 20th and 21st centuries” as reflecting a decline in violence. Our experience is not at issue here, however; rates of violent death are. Pinker counters this sort of argument in the book by reference to Kahneman and Tversky's “availability heuristic”, which leads us to overestimate the significance of catastrophic but rare events. For example, because we can all imagine the horrors of a plane crash, I may experience getting on a plane as a very dangerous thing compared to getting in my car. But the fact is that I am vastly safer on a plane than I am on the road. If Pinker is correct, it may be because Lifton is falling victim to this common cognitive trap.

In the face-to-face discussion, in any case, Lifton's reservations about Pinker's findings became clearer; they essentially revolved around the fact that, even if Pinker is correct about developments *so far*, they might be proven wrong in one cataclysmic, blinding flash of a mushroom cloud. Pinker adduced evidence about trends in violence; Lifton nodded but said, “I'm not so sure”. Pinker advanced more data; Lifton persisted in his doubt. One was reminded of the debate over conjectures and refutations: one cannot always know whether a refutation of more dire assessments such as Pinker's, convincing though it may be at present, will remain true long into the future. Nuclear weapons are what we now call a “game-changer”, one that the trends that Pinker identifies can reverse quickly and without warning.

The discussion between Pinker and Lifton raises questions about changes in military operations that we are now experiencing. For Pinker, it goes without saying that the shift away from wars with massive numbers of “boots on the ground” toward combat by drones, special ops forces, and computers represents a strengthening of the tendencies he has charted. Others are less sure, however, arguing that what may appear to be less harm-inducing methods of warfare may in fact entice us into actions that will result in worse conflict in the longer term. For the time being, however, the evidence would appear to

support Pinker's position. Missiles fired from unmanned drones may (and do) cause collateral damage to civilians, but aerial bombing certainly does as well, and probably more of it. But nuclear bombs would dwarf either of these alternative kinds of warfare. In short, until something dramatic happens, Pinker appears to be right, but the debate over the kinds of archeological and historical evidence on which he draws will continue for some time.

It is precisely the counter-intuitive character of Pinker's findings about the decline of violence that make us doubt them. It seems incontrovertible, however, that there has been a "humanitarian revolution" along the lines he describes; the human rights credo drives a great deal of contemporary politics, much to the good of its beneficiaries. Whether Pinker is right about the decline in rates of violent death depends on the reliability of the research on which he draws concerning levels of violence in less complex societies and on the way in which we measure violence, which is a complicated matter indeed. That he has stimulated a valuable discussion of our contemporary condition, and of violence as a problem of state organization, cannot be doubted.

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