

## The Better Angels of our Nature Stephen Pinker

A tour de force, covering a huge topic quite well

This is a huge book, but as Pinker says, it is a huge subject. He organizes himself by lists. First, there are six significant trends which have led to a decrease in violence.

1. Our evolution from hunter gatherers into settled civilizations, which he calls the Pacification Process.
2. The consolidation of small kingdoms and duchies into large kingdoms with centralized authority and commerce, which he calls the Civilizing Process.
3. The emergence of Enlightenment philosophy, and its respect for the individual through what he calls the Humanitarian Revolution.
4. Since World War II, violence has been suppressed, first by the overwhelming force of the two parties in the Cold War, and more recently by the American hegemony. Pinker calls this the Long Peace.
5. The general trend, even apart from the Cold War, of wars to be more infrequent, and less violent, however autocratic and anti-democratic the governments may be. Call this the New Peace.
6. Lastly, the growth of peace and domestic societies, and with it the diminishing level of violence through small things like schoolyard fights, bullying, and picking on gays and minorities. He titles this the Rights Revolution.

Pinker then goes on to examine the traditional explanations of violence, the traditional explanations of human nature which account for violence. There is practical violence, which you might call necessary violence. Then there are dominance, revenge, sadism, and ideologically driven violence. Opposing these are what he calls the better angels of human nature, empathy, self-control, our moral sense, and reason. Many of these characteristics are shared with our primate brethren, the chimpanzees on down, but some of them are uniquely human. With our ability to reason, and the unique human ability to impute motive to conspecifics of our own or other tribes, and our ability to express ourselves verbally, we are better able than any other species to negotiate our way through situations of conflict. A good deal of the decline in violence has to do with the maturation of these processes through the genetic evolution of the human animal, and more recently, through the evolution of our society and the ways in which societies socialize their members.

He concludes with five historical forces, which I find a little bit harder to grasp, but which serve as a vehicle for explanations of a number of interesting phenomena in the recent evolution of society. We have evolved Leviathan societies, in which the individual is pretty well controlled by state force. Not only our police, but our employers, our schools, and every other institution holds violence firmly in check as a matter of its own functioning. Other forces are commerce, which only happens when the partners are on peaceful terms, the evolution of women from mere propagators of the species to intellectual equals and partners in all of our undertakings, the growing information networks which bind us together, a process he calls cosmopolitanism, and lastly the increasing application of reason, which we would probably call the scientific basis, to human affairs, leading to a recognition that violence is in most circumstances not the best way to achieve one's ends.

In his discussion of ideologically driven violence he spends several pages discussing ideologies themselves. Specifically, he describes the groupthink environment in which a group comes to embrace dogmas that most of the individuals within the group would reject, or at least question, if they approached them on their own. The key mechanism is punishment of dissent, the ostracism of people who don't mouth the groupthink. Sounds to me to describe political correctness at Harvard just as much as Communism under Stalin. I am pleased that Pinker had the courage to resist said PC and defend the science behind the observations which got Larry Summers fired as president of Harvard. Calls to mind the "Kinsley gaffe", "A truthful statement told accidentally, usually by a politician."

For a guy with a long history of writing about evolution, he seems to pretty much avoid its implications in this book. In fact, he has more or less morphed from a true scientist to a social scientist/historian. Whereas "The Language Instinct" and "Words and Rules" got into leading edge science, and "The Blank Slate" brought us up to date on the theory of human evolution, this book is pretty much a compilation of other peoples' statistics and observations, weighted with Pinker's opinions.

The question that will go through every reader's mind when reading a book on the subject this vast is "how do you know?" Pinker answers that question in a way that I really admire - statistics. He says that most of us reason from anecdotal evidence. For instance, because the news media play up terror deaths such as those in Fort Hood, they

tend to be grossly exaggerated in our conscience. We would tend to equate the danger of death by an act of terror with that of dying from a lightning strike or industrial accident, when the latter are far more probable. Also, because there have been terror acts in the news lately, we would overlook the fact that the number of deaths attributable to terror have fallen off dramatically over the past few decades. Pinker does a good job of educating us by taking on our common sense understandings, showing that they are erroneous, and showing us a statistical methodology by which we can realistically estimate broad societal phenomena such as terror, death by war, murder and so on.

More than in his other books, Pinker reminds us of his Jewish roots, gently chafing Christianity for celebrating the sacrifice of an innocent man, and turning the cross, the instrument of sacrifice, into its holy icon. He also takes the obligatory swipes at George W. Bush for his bloodthirsty wars, conveniently overlooking the neocons like Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle who provided the intellectual foundation for the adventure. He also conveniently overlooks the fact that President Obama, despite his vehement campaign rhetoric to the contrary, has continued the wars, presumably also with strong backing from AIPAC, and that he has likewise been captive to advisors such as Larry Summers. His writing is such a thrill to read that I overlook these tropes with a grin. And I appreciate that he is willing to defend the "dead white men" of the Enlightenment and make politically incorrect observations about the different peoples who make up America.

I note, although Pinker does not address them in great detail, some concomitant trends. At the same time violence is decreasing, our religiosity, fertility and our tribalism are likewise decreasing. We are not fighting wars in the interests of religion because large swaths of humanity no longer believe. We are not fighting for lebensraum because we are not having the children that would be needed in order to populate more territory. In other words, at the same time we're becoming less violent, we're losing some of that zest for evolutionary success which led us to become violent in the first place. We can pray along with Doctor Pinker for a world in which there is increasingly less violence, but we need also pray for one in which the drive for human excellence continues to manifest itself.

Afterward: For an excellent review by a professional historian, albeit somewhat more critical than this review, I recommend you google "timothy snyder war no more". Snyder is the author of "Bloodlands," which I also review favorably here on Amazon.