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Peace in Our Time

The Better Angels of Our Nature: The Decline in Violence in History and Its Causes

By Steven Pinker

(Allen Lane/The Penguin Press 802pp £30)

INDENT A lynching took place recently outside an ironmonger's shop in Nairobi ... It was close to one of the city's fancier shopping centres, early in the morning, with commuters streaming down the road on foot. A man had his mobile phone stolen but managed to lay a hand on the thief just long enough for the crowd to close in. His two accomplices waded in to rescue their man but the mob engulfed them. Stones rained down. Boulders crushed their heads and chests. Then the crowd moved on, became commuters once more, and the police removed three bodies.INDENT

This scene of mob violence, casually reported in *The Economist* two years ago, is common in Kenya. Could it just as easily happen on the streets of London or New York? The politically correct reply is yes. The truth is no. Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature* explains why.

Pinker, a renowned evolutionary psychologist at Harvard, offers a 700-page tale of how humanity, led by the West, has collectively tamed the beast of violence. The result is that the post-1945 period is probably the least bloody sixty-five-year patch in the history of our species. Indeed, our chance of meeting a violent end through war or murder, or of being raped, beaten or tortured, has never been lower.

Pinker adroitly blends compelling stories with statistical metrics. The numbers are vital to dispelling myths, such as that hunter-gatherer societies are peaceful, the twentieth century was a period of unprecedented bloodshed, and that crime and civil war are on the rise. He nicely demonstrates precisely how 'nasty, brutish, and short' life was in former times. Hobbes, who used the aforementioned phrase, provided a clear blueprint for reducing violence: Leviathan, a sovereign state that could end the interpersonal anarchy that exists in a primitive 'state of nature'. For Hobbes, individuals trade in their right to exercise private violence in exchange for the state's protection.

The penetration of the state into human lives is the watershed process in the decline of human misery. The state's monopoly on the use of force in a territory reduces anarchy and thereby calms the 'inner demons' that evolution has hardwired in us. The romantic, anarchist conceit of the noble savage is a fiction, Pinker adds. Drawing on extensive genetic, anthropological and palaeontological evidence, the author lays out the astonishing statistics: an average of 15 per cent of deaths in hunter-gatherer societies are caused by warfare, with figures approaching 60 per cent in some cases. By contrast, even the most bloodthirsty states in pre-Columbian Mexico killed only 5 per cent of their people. The Wars of Religion in the

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries killed 2 per cent of the population of Europe and the world wars of the first half of the twentieth century 3 per cent. Today the rate of violent death from war and homicide in the world is measured in hundredths of a percentage point.

One of the most revealing aspects of the book is the way Pinker illuminates the connections between risky environments and our psychology. Avarice, dominance, revenge and sadism, four evolutionary-psychological mechanisms, are turbo-charged by the uncertainty that prevails in anarchic contexts. When order is replaced by chaos – as in slums, failed states or collapsing empires – dead bodies quickly begin to pile up. Order, even if repressive, douses the flames of violence.

The emergence of state societies ushered in the Pacification Process, the first of Pinker's five stages of progressive peace. The second, outlined in detail in Norbert Elias's classic, *The Civilizing Process* (1939), sees boorish behaviour and a culture of honour replaced by an ethic of self-restraint. This is related, in many ways, to a policed environment in which personal violence is less effective and courtly virtues gain pre-eminence. Self-control curtails impetuous killing. This polishing of behaviour unfolded in Europe from the Middle Ages through to the turn of the twenty-first century, sending homicide rates through the floor: from 100 to just one per 100,000 people per year. Duelling, lynching and other practices related to a culture of honour progressively declined, but held out longer in more anarchic backwaters such as the Kentucky–Tennessee border or, as noted earlier, downtown Nairobi.

Members of the lower classes, who had long committed violent crimes at rates no higher than elites, suddenly stuck out as a problem, largely because their neighbourhoods remained poorly policed and therefore rewarded violent thugs and the uncivilised cultures they promulgated. The lawlessness that prevailed in African American ghettos after the race riots of the 1960s fuelled an upsurge in black-on-black violence which was only tamed in the 1990s, when new investments in policing, community activism and criminal justice pacified these areas.

States and their rulers may have tamed private violence, but the tendency of states to battle each other and oppress their subjects left much to be desired. Heretics, witches, 'traitors' and Jews were tortured with glee: sawn apart, impaled, burned, drowned or broken on the wheel. Their deaths were consumed by a zealous public, which also lapped up cat-burning, bear-baiting and other blood sports. The rise of a humanitarian consciousness emerged gradually, as the ideas of thinkers from Spinoza in the seventeenth century to John Stuart Mill in the nineteenth diffused down the social scale. Religion largely accommodated secular humanism, airbrushing or reinterpreting the noxious bits of Scripture, for instance much of Leviticus. The conduit for humanitarianism consisted in the printing press and, later, television. The rise of mass literacy and education acted as a force-multiplier, compounding what Pinker calls the Humanitarian Revolution.

The Enlightenment, which gathered pace from the mid-eighteenth century among an elite 'Republic of Letters', powered the Humanitarian Revolution and gave birth to early pacifist ideas such as Kant's *Perpetual Peace*. But wars still regularly convulsed the great powers. Improvements in the speed and accuracy of killing increased the stakes. Yet the consolidation of Europe into a smaller number of states, most earning their living from trade and capitalism rather than plunder, calmed the violence. After the two world wars, interstate conflicts largely faded, not only in Europe but worldwide. The post-1945 era, which Pinker dubs the Long Peace, effectively put an end to our species' hitherto endemic saga of violent conquest. Beyond capitalism and trade, Pinker cites democratisation and membership of international organisations like the UN as prophylactics for war.

As any student of comparative politics knows, civil wars have multiplied during our age of interstate calm. Yet even here, Pinker cites the work of political scientists who have documented a marked decrease in civil wars since 1991. The post-Cold War settlement is decisive, argues Pinker, in that the Great Powers no longer have an incentive to make trouble in their enemy's backyard. Peacekeepers replaced military advisors and this helped wind down many conflicts. Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Congo were bad, but their body counts must be scaled against world population and compared with statistics in other eras. That perspective cuts through the impressionistic myopia of our 24-hour news cycle and reveals that the world is a less violent place than ever.

Pinker's book masterfully synthesises the latest research on primitive societies and evolutionary psychology with recent work in history, criminology and political science. It took an individual with his chutzpah and omnivorous ambition to collect the data to prove what many working more modest furrows knew to be true. Pinker's book exemplifies the neo-Enlightenment zeitgeist reflected in the work of public intellectuals such as Richard Dawkins, Matt Ridley and Christopher Hitchens. All simultaneously puncture the nonsense of the New Left and the mindlessness of the Religious Right. Yet few are as impartial as Pinker. A great strength of his book is that it comes across as an honest search for truth, unwarped by an agenda. The author is as happy to inform us that Democratic 'blue' states are more advanced than 'red' ones as he is to endorse the idea that mass incarceration helped 'recivilise' the ghettos of 1990s America. Unimpressed by the nostrums of postmodernism and identity politics, he even lauds the hated bourgeoisie. 'Intellectual elites', he teases, 'have always felt superior to businesspeople, and it doesn't occur to them to credit mere merchants with something as noble as peace.' While this sticks in my throat, Pinker's 'Whig history supported by the facts' inclines me to accept his premise that trade and capitalism helped promote peace.

Pinker's outing of the violence of romanticised Native American tribal societies runs alongside his confirmation of unfashionable commonsense notions. These include the idea that life is considered cheaper in many developing countries than in the West and that parts of the Muslim world remain under the sway of violent cultures of honour. Furthermore, the developed world is more progressive than many developing societies and

our own predecessors because we are better educated and more capable of controlling our emotions. Along the way, Pinker ridicules the cult of 'militaristic revolution', which finds expression in Mao and Ché radical chic. He rightly accuses it of inspiring tin-pot dictators and charismatic autocrats to butcher and oppress millions.

This is a good book, an indispensable book, a rich and well-written book, but not quite a great book. For while Pinker is correct that violence has abated, his account of the causes of this transformation comes up short. Unable fully to conceptualise a theory, Pinker shrinks from making predictions or does so only through the back door. He is thus unable to challenge cyclical notions of history, which argue that a few hundred years is not very long in human history and that more violent periods lie ahead.

One of the more frustrating aspects of this work is its inability to exploit the wisdom contained in Occam's razor. Here is but a subset of the explanations snared by Pinker: the state, the open society, the Flynn effect (in which average IQ increases over time), cosmopolitanism, travel, 'scientific spectacles' of reason, rising education, a balanced sex ratio, less alcohol, more marriage, population aging, the novel, the printing press, TV and radio, more imprisonment, war weariness, women's empowerment, trade, secularism, the rise of cities, the sanctity of state borders, the demise of honour, self-awareness through pop psychology, and the collapse of communism. To be fair, Pinker does try to identify five major thrusts: the state, trade, feminisation, cosmopolitanism and reason. Yet the explanation remains clunky, more a collection of parts than a working whole.

A better strategy would have been to emphasise the state-psychology nexus as the central mechanism, then permit other factors to flow from or modify it. Another route might have led Pinker to connect with his unacknowledged intellectual forebears, the modernisation theorists. They argued that developments in one area of human endeavour, such as the bureaucracy or the economy, create functional overflows into other spheres. Though he alludes to them, Pinker never develops a coherent theory of modernity or social evolution.

Modernisation theorists argued that complex societies were not merely more differentiated, but richer, more populous and stronger. After all, it is not enough to trace how violence declined in the feminised humanitarian states of the West. We must explain why these states defeated crueller opponents in the evolutionary race. Historical sociologists such as William McNeill or Charles Tilly have placed a great deal of weight on how secure, open trading states, which were bigger than cities and smaller than empires, developed unparalleled wealth and firepower. Francis Fukuyama noted that they created advanced weapons systems.

Yet we should not rule out the victory of regressive forces, which can corrode society from within. In my most recent book, *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth?*, I pointed out that fundamentalism is a modern response to the challenge of secular humanism. This self-conscious anti-modernism distinguishes fundamentalists from traditionalists. In contrast to Pinker's

unlettered traditionalists, who may be eventually drawn towards the glittering package of modernity, fundamentalists cannot be moved. They know, and reject, modernity. They use identity to insulate themselves from liberal humanism. Identity politics also explains why the far right has tripled its support in Europe during Pinker's New Peace. It makes sense of the souring of public opinion on European integration since 1990 and partly accounts for why the daughters of Cairo women who wore miniskirts now don headscarves. In Israel, the army is increasingly captained by men with skullcaps, while the ultra-Orthodox have exploded from a tiny fraction to a third of the Jewish first-grade class. Will this make the region more peaceful? It's unlikely.

This leads us to Pinker's misinterpretation of 'counter-Enlightenment' and romantic movements such as nationalism or socialism. Monarchism and restorationism aside, these are not throwbacks to the past but modern creations that pursue abstract utopias. The revolt against reason is a mainstream spirit that pervades our culture. It reared its head in the early nineteenth century, in the 1960s, and many times in between. It is doing so again. Today's nationalist, ethnic, fundamentalist or anarchist movements are unlikely to subside. Even seemingly trivial cultural flotsam like gangsta rap, death metal and cage-fighting ~~is-are~~ not harmless. These things may dovetail with the rising backlash against the absurdities of the safety culture to produce a new cocktail of private violence.

This book's title is a misnomer. Rather than tip its cap to nature, the book should have echoed J H Plumb's *The Death of the Past* and titled itself *The Death of Violence*. For, ironically, Pinker, who made his name arguing that nature shapes our behaviour, writes from a 'blank slate' perspective. Granted, he offers two chapters here on the evolutionary psychology of violence and cooperation. But our brain comes across as passive, consisting of a set of blank tools to be used-manipulated by cultural memes. It is one thing to say that our tribal instinct can be harnessed not only by our ethnic group but by a sports team or class ~~interest~~. However, the most important question, which remains unanswered, is whether we are more likely to support our ethnic group or our class when the two come into conflict. Does our nature permit humans to transcend ethnic and national attachments? Can we live without religion or utopian dreams? Again, we hear silence where an evolutionary psychologist should be speaking.

Such disappointments should not blind us to the immense contribution that Steven Pinker has made. He has crystallised the inchoate Whiggish feelings of many and grounded them in a mountain of convincing evidence. He has sewn together threads from a dizzying array of researchers. Everyone should read this book.