



## **The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined**

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**Selected by *The New York Times Book Review* as a Notable Book of the Year. The author of *The New York Times* bestseller *The Stuff of Thought* offers a controversial history of violence.**

Faced with the ceaseless stream of news about war, crime, and terrorism, one could easily think we live in the most violent age ever seen. Yet as New York Times bestselling author Steven Pinker shows in this startling and engaging new work, just the opposite is true: violence has been diminishing for millennia and we may be living in the most peaceful time in our species's existence. For most of history, war, slavery, infanticide, child abuse, assassinations, pogroms, gruesome punishments, deadly quarrels, and genocide were ordinary features of life. But today, Pinker shows (with the help of more than a hundred graphs and maps) all these forms of violence have dwindled and are widely condemned. How has this happened?

This groundbreaking book continues Pinker's exploration of the essence of human nature, mixing psychology and history to provide a remarkable picture of an increasingly nonviolent world. The key, he explains, is to understand our intrinsic motives- the inner demons that incline us toward violence and the better angels that steer us away-and how changing circumstances have allowed our better angels to prevail. Exploding fatalist myths about humankind's inherent violence and the curse of modernity, this ambitious and provocative book is sure to be hotly debated in living rooms and the Pentagon alike, and will challenge and change the way we think about our society.

## **The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined Details**

Date : Published October 4th 2011 by Viking (first published 2010)

ISBN : 9780670022953

Author : Steven Pinker

Format : Hardcover 802 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, History, Psychology, Science, Sociology, Philosophy



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Steven Pinker**

## From Reader Review The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined for online ebook

### Jan Rice says

Steven Pinker has written a monster of a book. He has used his intelligence to crunch a huge volume of material. He has made a number of great points to which I'm sure to be referring often.

Yet despite all the insights and accompanying drum rolls, I am suspicious of the dramatic hypothesis, the grand prediction that humankind has learned in any permanent sense to be kinder and gentler. That hypothesis is a welcome change from all the dystopian predictions, and I do think I, and western civilization in general, has it pretty good right here and now in terms of space to survive and thrive. I just don't think it's necessarily a permanent pinnacle. And when people are thumping their chests and seeing themselves as representing that pinnacle, well, that's concerning--even though he insists his views are scientific and not in the least messianic. So, if Steven Pinker had been a little more humble and had spoken of current times as pretty nice for some without necessarily approaching the best of all possible worlds, I could better countenance him. But Steven Pinker can be hard to take and he doesn't do humble.

Here's a cartoon making fun of Obama from the right--and of the notion that violence has declined. But, as when we see ten feet of snow and sneer at "global warming," everything is not always as it appears!

--Ramirez, 06-17-2014

On the other hand, given all the predictions of doom for the world that are in circulation, it's good to hear thinking from the other angle for a change. We need it. Having leaned too far one way, maybe the only way to get back in form is to lean the other way. And that's why, when I finish complaining, I'll be touching on some of Pinker's many surprising assertions, despite not being a Pinkerite.

But, first, here are some more of my objections.

Steven Pinker has thrown so many ideas and hypotheses into this book, and he's such a fast talking, smooth intellect that it's hard to evaluate all of it--as though he were some rogue trader wheeling and dealing beyond the capacity of his would-be supervisors. You can't help but be impressed by his moves even when they're too fast to follow and you know he's sometimes pulling a fast one.

Steven Pinker doesn't do justice by his opponents. I remember the Platonic principle I learned in *Plato at the Googleplex*--that you haven't refuted an argument unless you have it in its best articulation. Straw men won't do. We hear references to opposing ideas and their proponents but in this book it's assumed that Pinker's views represent the "normal" and "best" views. I mean his views that the current commercial economy and individualism do represent the best of all possible worlds. I may even agree with him, but my point is that not everyone does.

One of Pinker's main arguments for the decline of violence is that a lower percentage of humans suffer violence now than in the early modern period, medieval times, the Renaissance, or in antiquity or prehistory. Yes, a lot of people suffered violence in the 20th century, but, according to him, a lower percentage. But, if more people suffer now but are a lower percent of the total population, is that really less violence? Did anybody ask the particular sufferers? If each human is an end in him- or herself, and a greater number are

suffering, can that really be considered evidence for the decline of violence?

Actually, I took that line of argument--asking what the individuals themselves would have had to say--straight from Pinker's mouth:

Ho Chi Minh was correct when he prophesied, "Kill ten of our men and we will kill one of yours. In the end, it is you who will tire." The American democracy was willing to sacrifice a tiny fraction of the lives that the North Vietnamese dictator was willing to forfeit (*no one asked the proverbial ten men how they felt about this*), and the United States eventually conceded the war of attrition despite having every other advantage. (p. 309)(my italics)

Something similar happens--the author's doing what he himself reprimands others for--in the area of religion. Over and over, Pinker comes down hard on religion, blaming it for the violence and excesses of earlier eras. Yet he has to employ the most fundamentalist interpretations and he has to ignore aspects that run counter to that thesis, and all in a field that is outside his area of expertise. He has to take things literally and his interpretations as the one-and-only interpretations, laid down once and for all, for example, to take a common and conventionally-made criticism:

The overriding principle was that animals exist for the benefit of humans. In the Hebrew Bible, God's first words to Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28 are "Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." (p. 458)

And he has to pick out only the aspects of scripture that he finds distasteful. And use whatever "God said" in some Bible verse as if an actual historical event to compare to "other" historical events. Apparently he must even keep the King James flavor (*moveth*).

Expounding on the meaning of seemingly arbitrary and bizarre but nevertheless rigidly required manners and rules of etiquette, Pinker studies their history. But studying the history of religion that way wouldn't advance Pinker's argument, while blindness to any such thing does, so he leaves it in the dark. "*What you see is all there is,*" as Daniel Kahneman, another cognitive psychologist, says. My early impression from the quotes that were up when I started out was that most casual readers were reading *The Better Angels of Our Nature* primarily to hear Steven Pinker diss religion and reinforce their own views.

In an apparent spirit of fairness, Pinker disses the New Testament, too, but he reserves most of his ire for the Hebrew Bible. Let that be a lesson for you, Christians who disrespect your Old Testament. You are doing the work of atheists for them.

Speaking of cognitive psychology, Pinker pretty much worships at the alter of reason. Doing otherwise wasn't something that was going to advance his thesis; the reader will have to look elsewhere for the limits of reason and for the understanding of consciousness as a system of attention rather than as some pristine space for free choice.

One more criticism: I was surprised by a clear inconsistency on Pinker's part. This author loves local

authority, and, on the national level, Leviathan--a central government large and powerful enough to reserve violence to itself and wield it in an increasingly disinterested and just manner--as an alternative to a wild, wild west scenario of every man for himself. Yet when it came to the international level he argues correlationally for a "Democratic Peace" theory, calling the "empire" theory of peace "cynical." (p. 281) Huh?

And going back to religion for a minute, what about God and religion as a means to call up a symbolic "Leviathan," long before there could be an actual central government in that role. He hints as much on p. 539, quoting from Martin Daly and Margo Wilson's 1988 book *Homicide* on the subject of our retention of a "just deserts" approach to justice as opposed to adopting a purely utilitarian "deterrence" approach:

From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, this almost mystical and seemingly irreducible moral imperative is the output of a mental mechanism with a straightforward adaptive function: to reckon justice and administer punishment by a calculus which ensures that violators reap no advantage from their misdeeds. The enormous volume of mystico-religious bafflegab about atonement and penance and divine justice and the like is the attribution to higher detached authority of what is actually a mundane, pragmatic matter: discouraging self-interested competitive acts by reducing their profitability to nil.

Pinker himself goes on to argue that just deserts itself may serve a deterrent function, and that if we were to get rid entirely of the just deserts, "retributive" aspect, making the justice system "too narrowly utilitarian," then "malefactors would learn to game it. Just deserts can close off that option."

I think it is here, in those words, and in waffling sprinkled throughout the book on the subject of religion, that Pinker concedes the value of the very phenomenon against which he becomes so exercised. But he doesn't get that he has done so.

I got the impression that Steven Pinker really, really wants his theory that our better angels have won to be true. More on that at the end...

Now to some of his thought-provoking assertions and conclusions:

Prehistorical hunter-gatherer times were not some idyllic period during which the world was populated by noble savages free from the corrupting influence of civilization. On the contrary, life was nasty, brutish and short; those times were dominated by sneaky, murderous, rapacious raiding parties. Things had to settle down considerably before anybody could write or read any books, people! Yes, it was two steps forward, one step backward for eons; people lost health and strength when they traded in hunting and gathering for agriculture--but still!

Nor were medieval times some idyllic period over which to nostalgically yearn. That would be "cutting off your nose to spite your face," nose-snipping being one common response to a slight. Honor was priceless but life was cheap. The way we feel now--that our bodies belong to us and are ours to care for--a perception that seems to reflect "reality" but is of recent, modern derivation. It is an attitude we anachronistically think always existed. Instead, individualism developed gradually. With modern times we no longer belonged to some warlord or king; and with the spread of trade we had to get inside the head of the prospective trading partner and see others as we see ourselves..as we see others....

The biggest problems for a society come with an overload of young males. And, yet, the confounding preference for male babies that drives female infanticide in many cultures!

Infanticide itself is far from being some aberration attributable to the impact of modern stress and alienation. Infanticide was the norm from time immemorial--if it helped the survival of current young whose viability was already established, circumstances being such that a mother could care for only so many.

This kind of thinking--some people don't want to hear it! It's enough to garner threatening letters for poor scientists.

Genocide is not a disease of modernity either. We've just learned to recognize it, that's all. Life used to be a permanent holocaust for nameless multitudes, in slavery and through the impact of war and violence. No one thought anything was wrong with it unless it happened to you, says Pinker. Murderous death was supposed to represent the verdict of history, of God, in accordance with a way of thinking only lately subject to question.

In this day of competition for victimhood (at best a two-edged sword!), silence in the aftermath of genocide seems inconceivable, but if genocide was a *just verdict*, no wonder that, at first, Holocaust survivors couldn't talk about it. I am told that changed for American Jews in consequence of the 1967 Six Day War. Did that raise the possibility of an alternative verdict?

I want to digress here on how views on the suffering of violence are shifted around in religious narratives. Some ideas have begun to consolidate themselves while I've been working on this review but since they *are* off the beaten path of the review I'll hide them. (view spoiler)

No gas chambers? We may think genocide requires modern technology, but it doesn't. Just lock a town's population in a building and come back in two weeks. Think of the sieges of the ancient world, or of chariots, the advanced weapons of a long-ago day.

And, now--political correctness. For Pinker, PC is the residue of changes that have occurred and that we've therefore forgotten about.

During the transition to modernity, people did not fully appreciate that they were undergoing changes aimed at reducing violence, and once the changes were entrenched, the process was forgotten. When Europeans were mastering norms of self-control, they felt like they were becoming more civilized and courteous, not that they were part of a campaign to drive the homicide statistics downward. Today we give little thought to the rationale behind the customs left behind by that change.... ... (A) civilizing offensive can leave a culture with a legacy of puzzling customs, peccadilloes, and taboos. ... The code of etiquette bequeathed by this and other Rights Revolutions is pervasive enough to have acquired a name. We call it political correctness.

He also thinks we become amnesiac about the degree of change. We forget what the past was really like. We

say little has changed. That is related to PC, enabling us to keep our guard up against the return of "the bad old days," and it also enables activists to exhort us to do more. In other words, exaggeration. If we had to acknowledge how much better things are, could we get away with it? People say racism is just as bad as it always was, but it isn't. Same for antisemitism. Not so far.

My husband was taking a Greek course last fall. In Georgia, people over 65 can take college courses for free within the state university system if there is space--isn't that nice? In connection with his course we could attend some lectures on antiquity, and at one the doctoral candidate made reference to the Greek "dark ages" (from about 1200-800 BCE). There was an African-American woman of uncertain age--meaning not young (but younger than I, as nearly everyone is getting to be) in the audience. I mention her ethnicity for any light that may shed on her reply, and what she did, during the question-and-answer period, is take issue with the "dark ages" designation, for, she said, we shouldn't make such a designation given that *this* is such a dark age.

That exemplifies the point Pinker was making re forgetting what the past was really like and exaggerating the problems of the present, even as we all sat safe, secure, comfortable and diverse, discussing our esoteric subject.

That segues to the Moralization Gap.

Say I've done something to you. From your point of view, you were my victim. Our perspectives are going to be very different. Mine will be that whatever I did wasn't all that serious. At any rate it was a long time ago. Did I really have a choice? What can one expect, anyway? My stance is going to tend toward you should get over it already, and, while you're at it, stop being so over-sensitive. Meanwhile, you don't see it that way, not by a long shot. Whatever it is lives on in your memory and your heart. For you, not forgetting is more than common sense; it's a sacred trust.

In short, the Moralization Gap is about the impact of self-interest on our views and dealings with each other, a potentially fruitful method of analysis for understanding the dynamics of a situation and why it's so hard to get along.

According to Pinker the scientist is usually going to side *against* the past as a living cause and *with* what's over being over. So, in other words, he's assuming whatever it is *is* over.

One can envisage still more angry letters and protests against that poor scientist.

Why does Pinker need to believe at all costs in his Enlightenment values? It occurs to me that for a *philosophe* who is not from the religious majority it's distinctly unpalatable to consider what it would be like if the hands of the majority tradition were to be untied. What would happen to his vaunted authority then?

And yet when he goes on and on with his criticism of the Hebrew bible, it sounds like sucking up to that majority, as if to say "Listen to me: I'm putting them down; I'm not like them." And, in that way, he's reminiscent of Marx.

Here's a 2008 article by Jerry Muller asserting the triumph of ethnonationalism. If Muller's assertions are correct, they undermine Pinker's general hypothesis. (*Foreign Affairs* allows non-subscribers one article a month and two if you register.) <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/article...>

Here, critics try to refute Muller but don't succeed: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/article...>

Finally, don't think that all that's here is all there is. This review isn't very systematic. Or comprehensive; for example, there's game theory and the Prisoner's Dilemma in the evolution of cooperation. Or the concept "self-determination of peoples" as instigator of blood baths....

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### **Riku Sayuj says**

#### **The Skeptic's Peace**

Pinker warns the reader upfront that the book is huge, and with more than 800 dense pages there is no question about it. It is so wide-ranging that it is fortunate it has such a memorable title - the reader might have easily lost track of where it is all supposed to be heading. Individually, any single section of the book is a thoroughly entertaining masterpiece, but as a whole, in terms of coherence, and on how the thesis and the direction of the arguments hold together, the book is not as much of a delight.

But it is an ambitious book and is in some respects a new sort of history - almost a moral history of the world and Pinker deserves praise for the attempt. The next such historian to come along has been given much to work with.

Pinker is very convincing about the fact that violence has indeed declined; he is even persuasive on why it was but bound to happen. But when it comes to explaining the phenomenon (which he spends most of the book convincing us is real) based on his strength (psychology and evolutionary biology), he comes up slightly short. Pinker says all the right things and spares no punches and doesn't flinch from taking on the worst arguments the critics might throw at him but his arguments still seem to lack that knockout blow.

This is not to say that the arguments are weak. Pinker does a remarkable job in his survey of history, of stats and of a multitude of ideas. The scholarship is immaculate, the intentions are noble and the conclusions are plausible but I would still wager that Pinker would fail to convince the majority of his readers.

Why? Because he ignores the contingent nature of history and he forgets that the 'better angels' has not only made us a more moral society but has also made us a more skeptical society. I was disappointed that Pinker does not explore the preventive powers of sheer skepticism.

My own thesis, which was evolving as I read Pinker's, is ultimately that the skeptical mentality is what the 'civilizing process' (and the years of bloody wars) has ultimately given us - a conviction that there are no easy answers, no 'final solutions'. And that is a powerful deterrent to most forms of drastic action, since now it is harder to justify them. This to me is the real cause for optimism (of the measured and skeptical sort, as is our wont now).

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### **Tom LA says**

I love optimistic books, and there is a lot of optimism in the almost 800 pages of "The better angels of our nature". At the same time, I find it impossible to give a single opinion about this behemoth of a book,

because I found some of its elements truly excellent, some ok, and some absolutely scream-out-loud dreadful.

In brief:

- the great: the quality of the writing is superb. This is one of the best books I've ever read in terms of clarity of exposition and effectiveness of the writing. Also, at the very beginning the author outlines the structure of the book, which gives you a clear mental map of what you're getting into. As a plus, Pinker peppers his prose with anecdotes, jokes and references to pop culture (a bit like Malcolm Gladwell) that enliven the experience. I know some may not enjoy that. I do.

- the good: the analysis of the decrease in violent behavior throughout history is deep and overall fairly convincing. Pinker acknowledges the fact that we are missing a lot of crucial data (about deaths and violence in the past), and he's received a lot of criticism for presenting a thesis that's partially based on guesswork, but I think there is a lot of value in making the layman (like me) think about these topics, and at least in trying to find some general patterns. Some reviewers hated his methodology, or the way he handles some piece of data - all fair. I think it all makes for a healthy discussion.

- the not so good: is that Pinker didn't make much of an attempt to present a truly global perspective on the subject: in this book, Western world = The World. China, India, Africa, South America... marginal "who knows?" footnotes. "Religion" = Christianity. He explains that European history has the most available data, but I'm not the only one to think that he could have made a much better effort in this regard.

- the dreadful is where Pinker lets his underlying personal New Atheist agenda seep through without any restraint. Sadly, this lowers the level of the book in many parts to pure tripe, in particular when it comes to the very subjective reasons behind the apparent decrease in violence throughout history.

On page 642 Pinker spells out exactly what the main problem with his own book is: *"Even the scientists are piling on. Human beings are led by their passions, say many psychologists, and deploy their puny powers of reason only to rationalize their gut feelings after the fact"*. Ironically, that is precisely what he ended up doing with this book.

To be clear, this has nothing to do with Pinker's titular argument in favor the decline of violence, which as I said I found fairly convincing and rational. No, Pinker's emotional, irrational underlying argument is the following:

- 1) Enlightenment humanism, secularism and atheism are the only cultural forces for good in the world.
- 2) Religions have been purely a destructive, negative force throughout history, therefore our planet will be a much better place when religions have completely disappeared.

THAT is where the author's heart is.

*"As if biology didn't make things bad enough, the Abrahamic religions ratified some of our worst instincts with laws and beliefs that have encouraged violence for millennia".*

Incidentally, I just found out that Pinker and Richard Dawkins are buddies and share the same New Atheist credo. That gave me a sudden bout of nausea... Dawkins, the Grand Master of Missing The Point himself!

Watching Pinker zig-zag his way through his own version of world history where religion has caused only

mayhem and suffering is like watching a professional skier slalom down through the obstacles. You have to admire his incredible ability to make it through without tripping over every few seconds.

For example: in Pinker's world, the "*Rights Revolutions show that a moral way of life requires a decisive rejection of instinct, culture, religion, and standard practice. In their place is an ethics that is inspired by empathy and reason and stated in the language of rights. [ ] This conclusion, of course [but OF COURSE!], is the moral vision of the Enlightenment and the strands of humanism and liberalism that have grown out of it. The Rights Revolutions are liberal revolutions*".

Under this light, it becomes hard to reconcile and explain how Martin Luther King, a protagonist in the "Rights Revolutions", was a Baptist preacher who dedicated his life to worship, prayer and to following Jesus Christ as a role model. But no worries! Slalomist Pinker turns his skis swiftly and manages to dismiss MLK's adherence to Christianity almost completely! What a feat, ladies and gentlemen!! Here he goes:

*"MLK, as a graduate student in theology, was, of course, conversant with the Bible and orthodox theology. But he also read renegade theologians such as Walter Rauschenbusch, who criticized the historical accuracy of the Bible and the dogma that Jesus died for people's sins. King then embarked on a serious study of the social and ethical theories of the great philosophers, from Plato and Aristotle down to ... [etc. etc.].". "King was profoundly inspired by Gandhi's theory of nonviolent resistance not as a moralistic affirmation of love, as nonviolence had been in the teaching of Jesus".*

Unbelievable! After this microscopic cherry-picking, later on, on page 677 comes the master stroke. See how Pinker references his ridiculously insufficient excursus through MLK's cultural influences:

*"As we saw, Martin Luther King rejected mainstream Christian theology and drew his inspiration from Gandhi, secular Western philosophy, and renegade humanistic theologians".*

Wait, we "saw" what??? The only thing you said was that he read some books, that is all we "saw". We never "saw" that MLK "rejected mainstream Christian theology"! Oh, what a number he just pulled there. Of course, an anti-christian MLK would fit perfectly in Pinker's nice little box. If only it wasn't a complete fabrication! Maybe, if we stretch it a bit, King was a "liberal Christian", but still very deeply and fully embracing Christian theology. [www.sfgate.com/news/article/Writings-...](http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Writings-...)

For King, his Christian faith was far more than a source of soaring rhetoric. It was the boundless reservoir of the colossal courage he would need to risk his life day after day. Frankly, I find Pinker's statements about MLK's faith quite offensive.

So it is with unbelievably misguided violence (pun intended) that Pinker strips our history of any trace whatsoever of the positive influence of religion and religious people on the world, while focusing only on the stereotypical negative stories (of course, confusing "religion" with "corrupted clergy").

As I said above, what Pinker really means with Religion is Christianity, because it's the only one he keeps referring to, and he doesn't seem to know much at all about Hinduism or Buddhism.

*"Very little good has come from these ancient tribal dogmas. [List of stereotypical pub-banter-level bad things that the Church did] Defenders of religion claim that the two genocidal ideologies of the 20th century, fascism and communism, were atheistic. But the first claim is mistaken and the second irrelevant".*

Pinker is often leaving rationality aside to go FANTASTICALLY off the rails like this. Aside from the fact that he is clearly wrong, what is even the point of this argument? What value does a defense of atheism bring to this book?

Pinker then constructs a couple of sentences aimed at resolving and clarifying why he has chosen to completely ignore religion in the 800 pages of "The better angels of our nature":

*"Religion plays no single role in the history of violence because religion has not been a single force in the history of anything. [What does this mean??] The vast set of movements that we call religions have little in common but their distinctness from the secular institutions that are recent appearances on the human stage".*

Ok. So, let me get it straight: you find it reasonable to metaphorically piss on 100% of what goes under "religion" because you say it's always been so diverse and multifaceted that its overall impact on history is, in the end, completely irrelevant? There is no fundamental golden rule, no consolidated drive for empathy and compassion, no focus on respect for human life across the main religions? The declaration of Human Rights has been inspired exclusively by Enlightenment humanism, and not at all by Christian values? You are actually using the horrors committed by a small part of the clergy to invalidate all the positive messages of religion and, more importantly, the useful and positive initiatives that most religious institutions pursue throughout the world (and very rarely make it to the news - like these [www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/17/100...](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/17/100...)) ?

After these statements, it's not surprising that the author forgets to articulate how "secular ideas" possess this ideal quality of being "a single force in the history of something" that religions do not have. As if everyone who was ever inspired by secular ideas behaved in the same way and went exactly in the same direction - the BEST direction, of course.

Here Pinker goes on to perform some more professional skiing to get around other obstacles, like the excesses of the French Revolution, Cult of Reason etc., at the risk of losing his pants:

I thought people who kill, or in general use violence, do it in the name of anything at all: good, bad, old, new, religious beliefs, political beliefs, and science- or reason-based beliefs (a small example: the interpretation of Darwinism by the Columbine killers).

More in general, I wonder: was it really that difficult for Pinker to admit that all types of cultural movements, religious and non-religious, have been influencing each other and impacting the history of violence in many different ways? Why did he need to defend secular ideologies as if they'd never been the inspiration for violence or violent acts? And why did he pinpoint all these cultural movements as a cause "in themselves" for violence and war? How would communism IN ITSELF or atheism IN ITSELF or Christianity IN ITSELF cause atrocities and wars? They are ideas: words on paper. None of these ideas was ever a specific order to commit atrocities. I've always thought that, in reality, bad or deranged people are the ones who read those words and bend them to their basic, animal desires.

But again, Pinker is a human being himself, and each human being needs to worship something - we are powered by emotions, not by reason. As much as he tries to tackle this immense subject with pure rationality, his personal opinions come through loud and clear and crash to a pulp any of his efforts to sound objective and fully rational.

So, in the end, to go back to the main official thesis of this book: violence has probably decreased, overall. We can talk forever about the type of statistics used by Pinker in this book, but it seems he could be right, and I hope he is.

As for the reasons behind the decrease, as discussed, Pinker gets irrational about it, for understandable reasons (his wife). Here is his own explanation from his website: "*It was only through the intellectual influence of my wife, the philosopher and novelist Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, that I understood the logic connecting them. She explained to me how morality can be grounded in rationality, and how secular humanism is just a modern term for the world view that grew out of the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment (in particular, she argues, from the ideas of Spinoza). To the extent that the decline of violence has been driven by ideas, it's this set of ideas, which I call Enlightenment humanism, which has driven it, and it offers the closest thing we have to a unified theory of the decline of violence*".

A crucial passage here is "To the extent that the decline of violence has been driven by ideas". No one knows how much this is! It could be 2%! But Pinker certainly thinks the history of ideas has been much more impactful on reality than what it actually has been.

This is a common misjudgement of academics: many of them tend to give far too much practical importance to ideas, books and cultural movements, and too little to money and power.

If violence has decreased, I see no evidence that the decrease has been directly and mainly caused by the advent of the Enlightenment ideas, as Pinker is trying to convince us with this book. Those ideas were certainly a big piece of the puzzle, a great inspiration, just like many other ideas have been a positive inspiration. But fundamentally, I think what needs to be credited most of all is: military technology, increased wealth and global commerce, a change in the cost / profit scenarios of violence, the increased spread of information, and therefore better risk assessment tools.

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Here is a good book that quietly destroys the myth of Enlightenment perfection: "In defense of Faith", by David Brog

Here are some interesting articles that talk about Pinker's world view:

On his view of scientism:

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013...>

On his New Atheist credo:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/scienceo...>

On his (mis)understanding of religion:

<http://bedejournal.blogspot.com/2008/...>

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**David says**

This seems like a stunning misstep by the normally brilliant Steven Pinker. His ability to write with

extraordinary force and clarity has been demonstrated repeatedly in two separate areas of expertise -- linguistics and cognitive science. Unfortunately, the brilliance of his earlier books in those areas is nowhere in evidence in this regrettable dog's breakfast of a book.

I found it almost unreadable - poorly argued, undisciplined, self-indulgent, and - despite its grotesquely bloated length (800 pages) - support for its main thesis is woefully inadequate, dependent on a highly selective interpretation of existing data and completely unconvincing. Pinker can sling the statistical jargon (Poisson processes, power laws, the gambler's fallacy, the Gini coefficient) like a pro, but all the jargon in the world cannot make up for his recurrent habit of over- or mis-interpreting data whose limitations he consistently glosses over.

The jacket cover breathlessly promises "more than a hundred graphs and maps". Any graph is open to misinterpretation. Three of the most common ways of doing so are (i) selective interpretation (ignoring or explaining away the data that don't fit one's preconceived ideas) (ii) inappropriate extrapolation beyond the range of available data and (iii) failure to acknowledge the data's limitations, such as likely sources of bias, or extreme sparsity of information.

Pinker commits each of these errors, with such numbing frequency that one loses all respect. We are seriously asked to draw conclusions from a graph of the "rate of battle deaths in state-based armed conflicts between 1900 and 2005" (Figure 6-1) **while being instructed to ignore the figures for the first and second world wars**. After all, "the world has seen nothing close to that level since". This kind of rubbish insults the intelligence. Or you could look at Figure 7-28. Lest you be distracted by the actual data, Pinker has helpfully superimposed some very impressive looking solid lines documenting his cheerful belief in the rise of vegetarianism. These are much darker than the actual data points, presumably in the hope that the reader might be distracted from noting their complete lack of fit to the data. Worried about racially motivated killing of black people? Here are the yearly data (number of such killings) from 1996 to 2008:

5,3,3,4,3,3,3,4,1,2,1,1,1

Pinker's gleeful trumpeting of a five-fold reduction seems to rest on a pretty flimsy foundation to me. Not to mention being a little premature.

But nothing as inconvenient as facts, or their absence, can stand in the way of a man who has already decided he knows the answer. The threat of nuclear holocaust? Exaggerated, because - as any fool can see - nuclear weapons have never been used in wartime since Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One imagines this argument must be of great comfort to those who survived those particular "anomalies". Just as Pinker's breezy insistence that the only meaningful way to interpret the number of people killed in a given conflict is relative to the world's population at the time is surely meaningless to anyone who has lost a family member in battle. It's at best breathtakingly insensitive; some would find it deeply offensive.

To anyone who respects the scientific method, this is a horrifyingly bad book, one which completely obliterates Pinker's credibility. Don't waste your time.

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**knig says**

I have a peripheral awareness that Pinker awakens red penitus in a goodly proportion of his stalwart readers: but I don't know why. I shan't delve into this before I write up 'better angels': don't want to be distracted by

‘noise’.

800 pages of socio-economic postulating: always an inexact science, is going to rub someone the wrong way hither or thither. We see what we want to see, and 800 pages of the ‘humanities’ is like waving a red flag to a bull: plenty of scope to flare up, statistically speaking, and isn’t that just what we love to do best: exploit the ‘Moralizing Gap’ to justify our own world view: we’re brushed up dammit: well, OK, we may not be able to prove a point statistically, mathematically, economically, biologically or physically, but give me the humanities, I say: and see if I know my oochie from my achie.

The subject centre stage here is violence, (mainly in the western hemisphere, where data is more readily available) and the overarching conclusion is that it has decreased over time: in terms of war, rape, homicide and any other conceivable physical violation against the person.

No one, as far as I am aware, has disagreed with this overall premise, although certain definitions of violence are under debate: e.g. the high prevalence of infanticide has been supplanted with high levels of abortion, so in this particular area Pinker’s hypothesis does not hold up: but this is and other instances are outliers in the more general scenario of violence reduction.

Pinker’s starting premise is the biological impulse, the Darwinian hegemony for survival. This type of thinking will either resonate or repel. But it is an important point because if you’re going to go down the route of biological justification, then it’s inadmissible to switch and bait halfway through as Pinker does. And he does so by positing the issue of excessive violence in terms of biological necessity, but resolves its decrease through ambiguous channels such as self control, empathy, reverse morality and, incongruously, and ultimately, the Flynn effect.

Hence the incompatibility? How can something which starts off as nature be dampened by nurture? Huh? Huh?

On the surface, all of the theories Pinker posits withstands microscopic examination: the Civilizing Process (e.g. the contract between man and state) does indeed explain the decline in violence: prior to Henry II introducing the state vs Jane Doe as opposed to Joe Bloggs vs Jane Doe, violence was the only way out: you smacked your feudal neighbours about, or you lost out. The aristocracy were just as likely as the hoi polloi to ‘engage’ in a good brawl. After the change in law, it wasn’t so beneficial. The upper and middle classes modified their behaviour. The lower classes persisted (and persist), because they have never fully bought into the state-citizen contract (and to be fair, neither has the state, on their behalf). Other influencing factors intervene: commerce, the integration of minorities in spheres of influence which engender the ‘rights revolution’, the pacifying influence of women, the clear demarcation of national borders, the influx of democracy, the redefinition of moral values.

And you know what: it’s all true. All of it. All of these trends decreased violence. And not one person can deny say it didn’t. But how exactly: well, Pinker’s final analysis is: mainly, Reason. Now, I’ve cut and pasted this next section from Peter Singer in the New York Times book review, because he rightly summarises Pinker’s position and I am too lazy to. I’m saving my fire for the constructive analysis after:

‘Pinker’s claim that reason is an important factor in the trends he has described relies in part on the “Flynn effect” — the remarkable finding by the philosopher James Flynn that ever since I.Q. tests were first administered, the scores achieved by those taking the test have been rising. The average I.Q. is, by definition, 100; but to achieve that result, raw test scores have to be standardized. If the average teenager today could go back in time and take an I.Q. test from 1910, he or she would have an I.Q. of 130, which would be better

than 98 percent of those taking the test then. Nor is it easy to attribute this rise to improved education, because the aspects of the tests on which scores have risen most do not require a good vocabulary or even mathematical ability, but instead test powers of abstract reasoning. .....

Pinker argues that enhanced powers of reasoning give us the ability to detach ourselves from our immediate experience and from our personal or parochial perspective, and frame our ideas in more abstract, universal terms. This in turn leads to better moral commitments, including avoiding violence. It is just this kind of reasoning ability that has improved during the 20th century. He therefore suggests that the 20th century has seen a “moral Flynn effect, in which an accelerating escalator of reason carried us away from impulses that lead to violence” and that this lies behind the long peace, the new peace, and the rights revolution. Among the wide range of evidence he produces in support of that argument is the tidbit that since 1946, there has been a negative correlation between an American president’s I.Q. and the number of battle deaths in wars involving the United States. ‘

Here is where I wade in now: First of all, surely the Flynn effect is fallacious? There has been much debate about the accuracy of IQ tests in general, and how they are loaded with prescribed sense-data which automatically ‘disqualifies’ intelligent people who have not been immersed in the culture of this sense data. Second, the mode in which abstract reasoning is included in standardised tests is very easily a ‘learnable’ rather than an ‘applicable’ commodity, whose sequences have been incorporated in thousands of ephemeral ways in the educational system to begin with, and routinely tested over time. To use the Flynn effect as some overarching proof that we are ‘smarter’ than our predecessors is a travesty. But no more so than Pinker’s next theory, that ‘Reason’ has finally got the upper hand and carried us away ‘from impulse led violence’. This must be intuitively wrong, even to a philosophical novice. How can Reason deal with a biological impulse? In fact, when has Reason ever successfully ‘eliminated’ a biological impulse? Need I remind Pinker about the painful, unnecessary and degrading experiments in say trying to ‘reason with homosexuals’ that they have other choices? Conversely, I’m pretty certain no amount of reasoning will sway my biological sexual impulses either. Obviously countless other examples pertain. Pinker!!!

And yet violence has gone down. How to explain this, then? Given I don’t buy Pinker’s theory, I’m going to have to have a go at this myself. Why not?

First, Pinker concedes the impulse to violence is biologically driven. Then, buried deep within the 800 page text is a study by Preston and de Waal in 2002 ‘aversiveness of conspecifics in pain’, which basically translates into primates (and humans) having a natural inbred revulsion to inflicting violence on other primates/humans (backed up by Stanley Milgram’s shock experiment and the Trolley Problem). On a separate note, there is also the well known concept of ‘crowd mechanics’: or how we all fall into rank when the mob rules. My personal theory here is that, based on the studies above, it is possibility that violence was ‘overexaggerated’ in early history to begin with, due to lack of behaviour limiting controls. Perhaps in the wild these might be say greater geographical distances between competing primate groups. In human history, perhaps it was the state contract which modified an unnaturally rampant exhibition of violence between competitors in close proximity.(picture two pitbulls in a ring: excessiveness, eh?) Effectively then, an ‘overly violent’ population was stabilised to its natural levels. But this is not the whole story. ‘Better Angels’ shows we have gone one further, and overt violence is now perhaps below what might be considered the natural equilibrium. How did this happen?

Well, it didn’t. The first thing that I must concede if I am to accept that violence is a biologically driven impulse, is that it simply can NOT have been dissipated, and certainly not by Reason. The question then is, where did the violence go? Its not easily seen as a subject-object agreement, so what happened? Its been redirected, I think. We’re not rid of it, we’re simply rechanneling in a ‘non statistical’ way. Its not with a little trepidation I’m going to mention the xBox and film now. I realise I might be relegated to cuckoo

territory (my only consolation is I'll be sharing it with Pinker though!).

In the first half of the last century we had two world wars to keep us busy (and I think anybody would agree a combined total of over 40 million casualties is enough to keep anyone's bloodthirsty instinct at bay), in the 60s there was the Vietnam war and the most intense cold war stand off ever (Bay of Pigs), and from the eighties onwards, we have: well, video games. The xBox (and read here all its technical predecessors and contemporaries) cuts across class, race, age divide and unite men (yes, men) in an indiscriminate guts and glory campaign. Usage is phenomenal., and all inclusive. If you're old enough to hold the controller: you're in. Its the new passage of initiation: four year olds sat next to fourteen year olds next to forty year olds: killing, massacring, rampaging, destroying and eviscerating (apparently the only taboo is raping: there is no button for it. Says Pinker). If its not the xBox its organised sport in a way well, in a way sport hasn't been organised ever before. Not for nothing do we have the football hooligans and the mandatory Saturday matches. And finally. Film. This is something I've been 'doing' for the last month and a half: I've traversed the chronological gamut of film, and I find that the level of violence in film 'now' is phenomenal compared to anything found before the 1960s, with ever escalating etudes since. Its gotten so bad, that at the moment we are in a new era of image making: and I call it gender segregation. The majority of current offerings seem to run across gender biased lines: mindless violent action for the men, where the directors don't even pretend to be aiming for all round inclusivity, tempered with a backlash for women: just as silly a regression in stereotypical 'romcom' where no allowances are made for the non chicklit minded. Cinema is divided, in a way it never was prior to the 1960s onwards. Which serves no one well. But apropos of violence: this is where its all happening. Behind the scenes, where the victims are not 'real' people, and the statistics don't register. Which means, of course, that the problem of violence hasn't gone away.

It will resurface in all its glory. Just give it the right time and place.

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### **Lois Bujold says**

After a steady recent diet of short-attention-span theater internet surfing, it was very interesting to dive into a dense read that took me a week to chew through. (I am not a very fast reader, but I'm usually faster than that.) The exercise of following a really long, complex, sustained argument was probably good for me.

Seven chapters of convincing examination of historical evidence to the best approximation that could be managed, all of which jibes well with what I know or have experienced of history, followed by three chapters of attempts to figure out the *why* of the *what*. Pinker was pretty good about fencing off his facts from his hypotheses with suitable disclaimers. Several times he more-or-less interrupts his narrative to give the reader tutorials on basic statistics, in a desperate bid to bring his audience up to speed so that they can understand his data and how he massages it to get it to yield up more understanding. I was very interested in the brief survey of recent formulations in neurology and cognitive psychology that he used to underpin his arguments.

I was also reminded of a classic little book from the 50s, *How to Lie with Statistics* by Darrell Huff, which should really be required reading for every voter and consumer. (It has been reprinted in paperback and is now available on Kindle, I'm pleased to note.) Pinker, I think, is trying very hard to tell the truth with statistics; that little book would help ground one's evaluation either way.

I was charmed by how many of my own humanist beliefs about history and human nature were supported variously, not to mention how many of the jokes and cultural references I got, but naturally, I would be; Pinker and I are of the same generation and share a certain amount of world-view, after all. I am pretty fond of the modernity that cocoons me and has repeatedly saved my life, and he does not underrate it, either. Not everything worked for me in his arguments, but enough did for going on with. He footnotes the hell out of everything, which I appreciate. Along the way he dropped recs for what sounds like a lot of potentially interesting further reading, should I find energy for it. (31 pages in very small print of sources one could go check up, ditto.)

Highly recommended.

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## Miquixote says

Breathtakingly mindless for 2/5 of the book, blowhard the whole way through.

Sometimes a good joke is more revealing than 800 pages of blowhardness. Pinker gives himself away with this quote by George Carlin on page 622: I think motivation is overrated. You show me some lazy prick who's lying around all day watching game shows and stroking his penis, and I'll show you someone who's not causing any fucking trouble!...

...I hope I am not the only one who thinks it is not necessarily a good thing to be reduced to lazy pricks watching game shows and stroking our penises...

Anybody with a modicum of a background in anthropology, history, sociology and economics should be laughing themselves silly (if it weren't so disturbing how much influence Pinker has)...

Pinker proposes 5 ways that have reduced violence and can continue to do so: the Leviathan, Gentle Commerce, Feminization, The Expanding Circle, and the Escalation of Reason. The final 3 I have no argument against. But I have issues with the first 2. The state gets a monopoly on violence and capitalism is caricatured as gentle.

But there have been moments when violence spiked and recently, so Pinker has to explain it. Pinker conveniently blames Marxism (and leftism in general is caricatured the whole way through) as the singularly destructive ideology of modern times (without acknowledging the dangers of his own classical liberal ideology) and throws in 'a few other individuals' to the mix as the responsibles for the genocides of the 20th century, and the increase in violence in 1960s, 70s, and 80s. Fascism is acknowledged only as the twin of dialectical Marxism. Classical liberalism gets the nod as the ideology that reduces violence (of course Pinker would never admit that classical liberalism is even an ideology though). There is no comprehensive study of how fascism and communism came to be. It is really lazy stretch to say that fascism was just a few flukes of individual psychology, and not give credence to the idea that both fascism and communism came about from the specific conditions of a social system in crisis. Neither is it mentioned that big business actually financed and promoted fascism in Italy and Germany. That would complicate things too much.

So, nothing about communism coming into being as a reaction to capitalism... it is simply assumed that capitalism has been an overwhelmingly positive contribution to the world, since 'violence has declined since its advent, minus a few inconvenient peaks of violent wars and genocides' which, as I have already said, he attributes to Marxism and a few accidentally placed crazy individuals. Nothing either about theory,

philosophy, economics, anthropology, activism owing anything at all to Marx's ideas. Marx isn't even worth the time of day to Pinker, except as an explanation for violence. This should raise the question, really can any intellectual who tries to analyze the history of modern times be taken seriously if they haven't taken the left seriously? how can you call yourself an intellectual if you just shrug off the whole left side of the political spectrum as ideological nonsense?

So leftism gets all the blame for the bad stuff, but the increased rights that accompanied the 20th century are not attributed at all to leftist ideas or practice. They are accounted for as simply natural by-products of classical liberalism (ie. capitalism). The Expanding Circle of Empathy, the Escalation of Reason and the Feminization of society have nothing at all to do with leftist ideals. Class struggles never happened. Activists weren't leftists, they were classical liberals. These rights eventually became 'common sense'. If there any battles they were set forth by non-violent classical liberals, and always as peacefully as possible.

There are plenty of examples of serious breaches of truth here. According to Pinker, Martin Luther King apparently rejected Marx completely. Something patently false: 'King disagreed with Marxist materialism, but he found certain elements of Marxism's economic critiques of capitalism quite insightful' (I May Not Get There With You: the True Martin Luther King, Eric Michael Dyson). In fact, you would be hard-pressed to find any successful activist who doesn't find certain elements of Marxism insightful. But none of that is mentioned here because Pinker is not at an activist, he is status quo, out of touch with reality, pure and simple.

It is also fairly embarrassing for Pinker to not acknowledge how far from anything even remotely leftist or Marxist several so-called communist and their undoubtedly genocidal regimes were. Something akin to blaming Jesus for the Crusades. It is not said that it is a far more convincing argument that Stalinist Russia and Maoist China were actually STATE-CAPITALIST regimes. And indeed ideological twins of fascism, but not at all in the sense that Pinker argues. But if he tried to go there, his simplistic view of everthing would implode.

Most people who rave against communism base their assumptions on secondary sources. It is clear that Pinker hasn't understood Marx (or even remotely leftist politics). As a fairly well-read leftist, it is obvious to me that there hasn't been a communist state to this day, as much as the leaders of those states have claimed to be. Neither is it mentioned how many different interpretations of communism there are. He lumps the left all together. But if Pinker were to do so honestly, it would be quite a stretch to suggest that leftism is not about equality, freedom and the destruction of totalitarianism, oppression and alienation. In fact, you would think leftism was fascism the way Pinker describes it. Pinker comes across as a reactionary anti-communist suffering from the Red Scare, still inhabiting the frigid mental landscape of the Cold War.

But hey, when you are an authority in Harvard, sweeping caricatures and generalizations are allowed. There's more. According to Pinker, dialectics are simply mysticism and a justification for violent struggle. Class struggle is of course also blown off as mystical dialectical hogwash. Well, that is some feat blowing off dialectics, considering how many of the greatest philosophical works in world in the last 2 centuries have had to deal with the idea of dialectics (because of its intellectual force), but the eminent Steven Pinker waves it off with his magic wand and without anything at all to back it up.

He also blows off 'intellectuals' in general because 'they are attracted to extreme ideas'. But he wholly contradicts himself when he proposes the superior intellectual value of classical liberalism. Which of course isn't extreme, it is just the obvious rational choice that doesn't even need to be intellectually defended. How arrogant can you get?

It's also fairly wacky when he argues that 'intelligent people overwhelmingly tend to be liberals'. Based on IQ test scores and surveys of people with high scores he concludes that the smartest people are liberals and the other lesser ones are leftists and conservatives. But what about the smartest of the smart (the intellectuals) being attracted to extremes? This should leave you wondering if these arguments are for real? Apparently so.

I am not familiar enough with the statistics that Pinker inundates us with to know if 'violence' has actually dropped or not consistently, progressively and continuously throughout history. But our propaganda alarm bells should sound when anyone makes a statement like that. According to Pinker, it is obvious that primitive tribes were the most violent humans ever. I have read some fairly convincing arguments otherwise, but I think it is likely the differences in opinion are going to come in the very definition of violence. The definition of violence by Pinker is dictionary strict, and very limited. Humans sometimes have to fight to survive. Pinker doesn't substantiate any difference in self defense and aggression, justice is mocked, freedom is not even covered. But when class struggle is just vain ideology to him, what can you expect?

Neither does he take on the prison industrial complex, although he does acknowledge the importance of caging up of the maximum amount of people that are considered most likely to fight back and apparently thinks it a necessary evil if there are 'a few too many' (as deterrence). Apathy or depression is not even mentioned. But of course if you look it up in a dictionary, violence isn't any of those things.

Since only 100,000 have been killed in Iraq (a disputed low-flying number) and there were at least 1,5 million in Vietnam, apparently US foreign policy is getting way more compassionate. Of course nothing is even mentioned of thinly-covered up US intervention all over the world (like in Latin America). An ignorance easily corrected by leafing through books like 'Killing Hope' by William Blum (on the ongoing American holocaust). A book Chomsky says is 'far and away the best book on the subject'. But the book has leftist leanings, and is therefore intellectually irrelevant to a religiously loyal status quoer.

Democracy is hailed as a reducer of violence, and justifiably so. However he also has an extremely limited idea of democracy. There is a crisis of democracy right now because of a lack of participation (the Manufacturing of Consent and Public Opinion) and fast-growing awareness of it. What about acknowledging the advent of a type of coercion that creates ignorance, apathy and depression? This is not considered as an element of violence of course. It would even appear to be a positive thing, if it can reduce those violence stats and keep us wanking. Even if certain types of coercion cannot be defined as violence, why not acknowledge it for what it is?

As said, Pinker targets ideology as a main cause of violence. When ideologies clash it often creates even more violence. Obviously. But it would seem Pinker is unaware of the current ideology's potential for violence (and many have argued quite well that it is the main present cause of violence today). Currently the ideology of capitalism is being questioned by a large variety of people (because of its weaknesses). If and when that increases there may just be an increase in violence again, and not only from the Leviathan state that Pinker raves so much about.

Of course Pinker would blame the new ideology if that happened, instead of the old one and all its weaknesses that brought it to the conflict. This is ironic because he does spend some time criticizing conservative ideology for its inability to adapt to progressive change. I argue that Pinker betrays exactly that attribute despite his humanist claims. Liberals and conservatives are the only two electable parties (because neither is so different from the other and neither is at all threatening to the current status quo). But for Pinker to have his moral authority he should also be arguing that if capitalism doesn't work well enough or starts to

create bigger problems than it solves (ie. environmental destruction and huge gaps in wealth and debt), it is the one that may actually PROPAGATE violence. But then again we might just sit around watching game shows and stroking our penises. If Pinker is right, that would be ideal.

Perhaps this can be avoided if the old ideology adapts peaceably. But neither should anyone who analyzes history or anthropology honestly assume that the current ideology is forever. Of course capitalism hasn't always been there, has only been there for a tiny amount of history, but Pinker sidesteps that. If it ain't broke don't fix it. The thing is that a large amount of us aren't convinced it ain't broke.

But perhaps Pinker's main point is that we are less likely to adapt violently no matter what the change. Perhaps so, but denying or misunderstanding certain causes of violence (gross inequality and oppression which lead to new ideologies) will not help the matter. The so-called mystical class struggle and violence around the time of Karl Marx and the following century were actually consequences of the inability of capitalism to adapt to its structural weaknesses. If there were enough reforms the violence caused may not have been necessary, or rather it could have convinced the masses it wasn't necessary to challenge the system.

However, the inflexibility and fundamentalism of classical liberalism would seem to have actually CAUSED the majority of violent conflicts. One doesn't have to be a Marxist to see that the capitalist system did not adapt appropriately (or peacefully) to the class awareness (or if you prefer inequality awareness) that was developing. Pinker calls 'class awareness' ideology though. A more peaceful adaptation did not come until after World War 2 (with Keynesianism) IN REACTION to THE CLASS AWARENESS. But this has been progressively taken apart since around 1980. The fear of class war retribution has diminished. With the recent austerity measures only being the latest in a series of measures to increase the wealth of the rich at the expense of the middle class and poor.

But that doesn't mean that a self-defense type of violence will not develop in the near future if the current system doesn't adapt appropriately (rising homelessness or unemployment could escalate things). The fact that violence actually went down during the 30s Great Depression is almost gleefully mentioned by Pinker though. So there really isn't a guarantee that violence will increase. In fact, it would seem that the elite powers are getting impetus from implementing their austerity measures because of Pinker-esque ideas of how non-violent we have become.

Anyhow, if Pinker is right and the world is better off being wankers than trouble-makers, then our intellectuals should be the best wankers. And so for that reason a wanker cannot read trouble-making literature, or leftist perspectives, one cannot at least acknowledge their intellectual validity and consider them. Pinker doesn't acknowledge these debates because he is pushing his own ideology, or rather absurdly and falsely pushing the idea of the 'end of ideology' (which is actually a thinly-veiled support for the current neoliberal utopian ideal). One that is as unsustainable and unrealistic as any utopia or ideology. Keep wanking.

The book was long and tiresome in many parts, but also very rewarding in the sense that it is an incredibly revealing look at how corrupt and anti-intellectual academics can be. Pinker is arrogant, puffed-up, self-promoting and irresponsible in his ideologizing (ironic isn't it?) here. In Pinker's mind, it would seem he has earned the right to step right out of his specialty of psychology and linguistics and make sweeping generalizations in anthropology, history, sociology and economics.

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## Faruk Ahmet says

Loathing is the word. It infuriated me. You'd think that after all these years one would stop being surprised by this style of typical new-atheist/liberal argumentation but when I see this much cherrypicking, oversimplification, handwaving and western supremacism shoved into a single book, I still get all worked up. And of course, it doesn't help that they call themselves "The Brights" and "The Enlightened" etc. I mean, who does that? Even if I was intellectually convinced by their arguments, I still wouldn't wanna hang around these jerks.

His main thesis is simple and for anyone brought up after the 19th century, overly familiar: We were savages, then we were saved by Science and Reason. Not all of us, of course, only Europeans and Americans at first, but thanks to Capitalism (or as he labels it, *the gentle commerce*), everywhere else is catching up slowly, too. One time this evil thing called Communism had suddenly sprung up out of nowhere and caused many deaths and suffering but it was ultimately defeated by the Allies of Light. Etc.

"If you'd suggest occupying another country today, everyone would laugh at you and they'd think you were crazy; it is a thing of the past", he says (paraphrasing). So what about Iraq or Afghanistan? Panama, Bolivia, Vietnam, Libya and countless other bloody conflicts and interjections by the Western forces, mainly USA? Oh, they are not "wars", he says, but merely unfortunate but "defensive" actions taken by civilized nations to protect their democratic ways. Isn't it incredibly telling that in an EIGHT-HUNDRED-page book about the history of world politics and violence, the word "imperialism" is not uttered at all. Not even once.

There are a myriad of graphs and numbers stuffed inside. But the way he handles them and the way he chooses the sources he gets them from is so blatantly manipulative that it's cringe-inducing. A source repudiates his claims about "The Long Peace" and "the waning of war", and draws a bleak picture of the condition the world is in outside TheCivilizedNations? Well they are extremist, communist, leftist fanatics, you can't trust their data. Here, we have a government-funded organization that prints out numbers that fit my theory beautifully; surely they're the trustworthy ones. In one of the most embarrassing moments of the book, *«we are seriously asked to draw conclusions from a graph of the "rate of battle deaths in state-based armed conflicts between 1900 and 2005" (Figure 6-1) while being instructed to ignore the figures for the first and second world wars»*\*\*. Why should we ignore two world wars, while looking at the history of wars, you ask? Because "after all, the world has seen nothing close to that level since". It was a fluke. This is kinda like saying "please don't call it murder just because there's a body lying on the floor with a knife in the back, since it's not like we see something like that everyday". Forgive me for the vulgar language, but this reminds me of a lovely Turkish idiom: "If my aunt had balls, she would be my uncle".

Well, I could go on and on (like this occasionally biased and contrived -leftists!- but *very* detailed and informative review does) but you get the gist. In the end, it's not that I find the claim that violence in general is getting comparatively subsided (and it's at least partially thanks to Western Civilization) completely worthless. It doesn't even have to be a glorious, total, irreversible change of paradigm to be worth praising. If we are living in a marginally better, more peaceful world, we should know about it, and understand the why and the how so we can push it further. If it really turns out that the Westerners are morally superior and more evolved or something, so be it; it's not the premise that bugs me at all, but if it takes this much deceptive and manipulative "scholarship" to prove a point, maybe we should at least raise an eyebrow in mild suspicion before patting our world of gentle commerce in the back, you know.

\*\*Quote from David's review, because I'm too lazy to look it up myself.

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## David says

In this book, Steven Pinker explores a very controversial thesis, that is, violence is declining. Different types of violence are declining on multiple time scales. It would seem like the twentieth century had some major wars and plenty of genocide to make his thesis sound rather foolish. But in the first seven chapters he shows lots and lots of statistics to back up his thesis. In the eighth and ninth chapters he also explores the scientific reasons for violence and the reasons for increasingly non-violent behavior.

The book is very comprehensive--it is quite long and detailed. The first chapters are not particularly "heavy" reading, but towards the end of the book, it can be tough-going--but fascinating throughout.

Pinker tackles the main objection to his thesis--the three worst dictators of the twentieth century (Hitler, Stalin, Mao) were responsible for an immense amount of violence, deaths and misery. Some of the reviewers here at Goodreads have remarked that Pinker underestimates the number of deaths that are attributable to Mao. Perhaps he did grossly underestimate the numbers--I really don't know.

Pinker makes an interesting point about the recent theory, raised in the book *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*, that crime in the United States declined in the past few decades, because of the legalization of abortion in 1973. The idea is that the reduction in unwanted children led to fewer violence-inclined youths. Pinker argues that after 1973, the proportion of children born to vulnerable women actually increased, rather than decreased.

One of the reasons for the decline in violence is the increase in literacy and reading. Pinker argues that the transmission of new ideas in books has acted as a liberal force in society. He shows that during the Middle Ages, most people were religious and believed in the *literal* truth of the bible. Heretics were everywhere, and were persecuted in wars, massacres, pogroms, executions and torture. Nowadays, while religious people "believe" in the bible, most do not take such a literal interpretation. They don't think that it is moral to invade a city and kill--or take as slaves--every single person. A higher value is placed on human life, because of the "shift from valuing *souls* to valuing *lives*." Pinker writes,

The theory that religion is a force for peace, often heard among the religious right and its allies today, does not fit the facts of history.

Later, he writes,

The world has far too much morality.

Very true indeed.

Pinker shows how game theory plays a big role in the evolution of morality. In fact, he defines morality as the opportunity for positive-sum games. In so much of history, people played in zero-sum or even in negative-sum games. For example, war is usually a negative-sum game, in the sense that so many people die and suffer, that the gains to the victor are completely overwhelmed by the losses to both sides.

Nowadays, the language of violence is often cloaked in "bureaucratese", in words like purges, deportations, bombardments, pacification, rectification, ethnic cleansing, collateral damage, and rendition. These

euphemisms help to self-exculpate the perpetrators of violence, and make violence seem to be justified or involuntary.

Pinker discusses in some detail the factors that he believes have led to decreased violence in recent times. He talks a lot about the concept of Leviathan from the book by this name by Thomas Hobbes. According to Pinker, the presence of a legitimate, strong central government helps to reduce violence, at least on a personal basis. People are less inclined to violence when they think that punishment is likely. (Not always true, but usually.)

He describes how "gentle commerce" helps to "turn zero-sum warfare into positive-sum mutual profit ... sweetening the outcome of mutual pacifism with the mutual gains of exchange." Pinker also shows how "feminization" has helped to move society "... away from a culture of manly honor, with its approval of violent retaliation for insults, toughening of boys through physical punishment, and veneration of martial glory."

One of the most interesting--and potentially useful--parts of the book is his analysis of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The root of the problem is that there are so many *sacred* concepts on both sides. A sacred concept is one that is not subject to negotiation--it is completely *off the table*. People will not compromise on their sacred values, but they might compromise on so-called "pseudo-sacred" values. Pinker describes evidence that both sides might be willing to *declare* compromises through symbolic concessions, even though they are not actually willing to *perform* on their compromises. Pinker writes,

To find *anything* that softens the opposition of Israeli and Palestinian fanatics to what the rest of the world recognizes as the only viable solution to their conflict is something close to a miracle.

It all has to do with the symbolic framing of a peace agreement.

There are certain parts of the book that might make a squeamish reader cringe--there are some short descriptions of barbaric tortures. If you can get through (or skip) those parts, then you will find a fascinating theory developed from the point of view of scientific scholarship--sociology, psychology, and evolutionary biology. As with all of Steven Pinker's writings, this book is fascinating, comprehensive, and sure to be controversial. He has (most of) the facts behind him, and it is difficult to argue against his major points.

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## Scott says

Are you afraid of being of being attacked or murdered? Do you think our society is becoming more violent and less safe? If you watch the news, read the papers and listen to politicians it would be logical to be afraid of the seemingly rising tide of violence and criminality in the world. However, Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature* will show you your feelings are misguided- crime and violence in society is lower than it has ever been, and our often idealized past (even the recent past) was a very violent and scary place.

Before you read this book (and you should read it) be aware that it is Looooong. Weighing in at 832 pages *The Better Angels of our Nature* is no reading Everest, no Tolstoy, but each of those pages is a heavy bit of paper, drowning in a kudzu of fascinating facts and info that has spread to near every sentence. It was a long march to the final page, but trust me, it was worth it.

This is a fascinating and constantly surprising read. Pinker presents the perfect antidote for the doom, gloom

and bolt-your-doors crime hysteria present in the media. I already knew that we live in a comparatively safe era of history- the lack of recent Viking raids on my apartment block is noticeable - but Pinker makes it clear that this is by far the safest period of human history that there has ever been. Present-day developed nations make even the 1970s and 80s look like a time when to step outside was to enter a gritty urban version of the hunger games, complete with roving packs of armed rapists (the sexual violence stats for those decades are genuinely horrifying).

The United States, sadly, is still more violent than Europe or Australasia, but even with all the shootings and killings of recent years the cold hard statistics show that Americans are still safer than ever. This completely flips the established narrative in politics and the media, and the hard data shows that suicide is a greater threat than murder, or even from war and natural disasters combined. The average person in twenty-first century society is more likely to die by their own hand than they are by the hands of others.

The reality of contemporary crime and violence is completely contrary to the apocalyptic vision presented by fearmongering politicians and news outlets and *The Better Angels of our Nature*, or at least a summary of Pinker's findings, should be compulsory reading for anyone standing for public office. Pinker's book stands as an engaging testament to how much progress we have made in making our broader human society far less violent.

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### **Daniel Clausen says**

Steven Pinker's "The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined" is a big ambitious book. Perhaps too big, perhaps too ambitious. And perhaps, too sprawling for its own good. One could opt for a Peace Studies reader and get a more eclectic taste of what research is out there. Would it be as comprehensive as this book? Maybe, maybe not, but you would get the benefit of tasting the many kinds of literature through many different voices.

Here, we get a great deal of peace science, behavioral science, religious literature and more, all sifted through one scientific (and often brilliant) voice. Much research is included in this volume, and the many references often drown out the voice, but the voice is also in control of how we receive the literature.

So, what is the book -- polemical argument, scientific memoir, or reference volume? I doubt it knows the answer.

The point of the book is simple: to outline how violence has decreased, and to answer why so that we may learn from our successes and continue to replicate them.

The book might strike some as counter-intuitive -- in the time of Rwanda, Darfur, Iraq, mass-casualty terrorism, runaway gun violence in the US, and much, much more, it would seem like our times are just "another bloody century". Surely, if we subtract the effects of nuclear weapons in deterring warfare between major powers, and on top of that, if we discount the way modern battlefield medicine has led to a decrease in fatalities from warfare (many are still wounded and crippled), then our century can't be that much more peaceful than others. And there is also the other issue, the possible historical contingency of our own "long peace" (much like the long relative peacefulness between the Napoleonic wars and the first World War). One really bloody hegemonic war between nuclear powers might be all that's needed to eliminate our current gains.

And yet there is a surprising body of evidence that suggests that violence has decreased that spans across multiple disciplines. Pinker makes the case that this trend is deep, enduring, and possibly sustainable. Ancient and medieval societies took genocide, rape, mutilation and other types of violence as given. All of these forms of violence were permissible as long as customs and traditions were adhered to.

For me, the most interesting aspects of the book are the tracking of the rights movements and the civilizing processes. These are truly fascinating aspects of the evolving peace that I was not fully aware of. I think for many of the scholars coming to this book with some background in peace studies or studies of violence, they will have a similar reaction to mine. I know that...and I know that...and I know that...but ah!, I didn't know that!

This speaks to the benefit of having such a comprehensive volume. Peace researchers who are aware of one type of literature might be bored by some chapters of the book, and yet, find themselves enthralled by others.

Overall, a fantastic read and one that I would readily recommend to others.

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### **Kate Savage says**

Make me a t-shirt that says "I read an 800-page book and all I got from it was this lousy review."

The Good:

There's a nice irreverent romp through the Bible, he shows what monsters "chivalrous" knights were, shows why we shouldn't be so afraid of terrorist attacks or child abductions or Iran.

The bad: everything else.

How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Conquistadors:

"Though imperial conquest and rule can themselves be brutal, they do reduce endemic violence among the conquered" (56).

P opens with some good, old-fashioned, crappy anthropology. After all, if he's going to argue that we've become kinder gentler people, he needs to lump all pre-state societies into the trashheap of the violent.

He's mostly inspired by the Napoleon Chagnon crew, which means portraying indigenous people as nasty and brutish (and side-stepping consent/ethics guidelines).

P loves broad statements about very diverse people. He says of all non-state people "In their theory of causation there is no such thing as a natural death" (137). There is a singular "they," with a "theory." Or: "Herders all over the world cultivate a hair trigger for violent retaliation." I've studied pastoralists, find them to be escape artists from violent confrontation. Some live rough lives and some are gentle and egalitarian. This kind of world-wide smear is something you can do when you're talking about people who aren't Harvard academics, and can't take you to task for what you're saying.

His methods for tallying war deaths are shoddy and insane, and all the non-state societies he looks at are on the edge of states, dealing firsthand with imperial violence.

He's constantly flirting with eugenicist narrations -- the Yanomami and the Maori are just genetically more violent, while white europeans maybe are genetically gentler. Forgive me for chuckling when he then shudders that genocide is "unthinkable" and warns against "'The cognitive habit of treating people as instances of a category."

(His lust after the leviathan also pushes him to show that in Nazi Germany the one-on-one homicide rates continued to decline (79). I mean, if you ignore the mass-murdering part.)

Hatin' on the Poors:

The Civilizing Process, which gave us table manners and non-violence, "never fully penetrated" two zones: "the lower strata of the socioeconomic scale, and the inaccessible or inhospitable territories of the globe" (81). Ergo, violence comes from the poor and far-flung (though it's worth asking, while we're at it, "inaccessible" and "inhospitable" to whom? The board rooms on Wall Street are inaccessible and inhospitable to me, but I assume that's not who he's talking about).

Proof that the lower classes were vicious comes from the fact that terms for poor people were synonymous with viciousness. Epithets are proof of that minority is bad, not proof of some messed-up discrimination.

Racism is a thing of the past, says P, before he says a bunch of racist shit.

Like: white people might just have better genes for "maturity and self-control" (121). Cities became peaceful because "tourists and young, urban professionals recolonized downtowns," replacing those nasty, poor brown people (117). Uneasily I see him dividing up crime rates between "whites" and "blacks," to show that any increase in crime is just because "lower-income African Americans were effectively stateless, relying on a culture of honor (sometimes called 'the code of the streets') to defend their interests" (98).

What's the most effective way to end this violence? "putting more men behind bars for longer stretches of time" (121). Because "Imprisonment physically removes the most crime-prone individuals from the streets, incapacitating them and subtracting the crimes they would have committed from the statistics" (122). Don't worry about the ways that prison might breed violence or is itself violent.

P repeatedly refers to poor and brown people as living in a state of "anarchy," without the benefits of belonging to a State. This despite the fact that the poor and brown actually tend to come up against the state far more frequently than others. They bear the bruises from the state on their bodies. They are put behind bars at insane rates, they are physically deported, they are forced by the state to jump through hoops to get basic goods like sufficient food, healthcare, and housing. The wealthy, with their off-shore tax havens, are far more stateless than the poor.

In a global perspective, P puts out a map showing how poor countries have the most "sites of conflict." He doesn't ever mention that when a rich country is aggressive against a poor one, naturally the conflict will be fought out on the soil of the poor country. Any counter-attack is, after all, "terrorism," not the same thing as the gentlemanly war we're waging on them. The air bases in Nevada from which direct their remote-controlled armed drones are not "sites of conflict."

Also, extra gross points when he's reasserting that "European governments may have brutalized the natives when conquering a colony and putting down revolts, but they generally had a fairly well-functioning police, judiciary, and public-service infrastructure. And while they often had their pet ethnic groups, their main concern was controlling the colony as a whole, so they enforced law and order fairly broadly" (307). Pet

ethnic groups. Well-functioning police. No, no way did he say this.

But as P shows, racism is only natural. Babies are racist, after all (523).

And Sexism:

“We’re all feminists now,” says the man who’s never been a feminist (404).

Evolutionary psychology folks like P are quick to jump into gender-essentializing, and redescribe sexist shit as being biologically mandated. Reading this book helped explain why P hurried to the defense of Harvard pres. Larry Summers when he suggested that women weren’t in math and sciences because of their woman-brains. He reiterates it in this book -- “most labor economists consider these sex differences to be a contributor to the gender gap in earnings and professional success” (517).

The book is full of men-are-from-mars-etc. claptrap, usually in a form that is totally unnecessary, and without caveats. “Men fantasize about copulating with bodies, women fantasize about making love to people” (405), says this expert on your fantasies. He later cites a study showing that when you compare people who have done a will-power-depleting task and people who haven’t, and then ask them if they are likely to have sex with someone, will-power-depleted men are the most likely to say yes. Ergo, such differences are natural, and men are the ones who have to exercise self-control to live in the civilized world. Women, on the other hand, these natural gatekeepers, are just inherently sexually inhibited. (604)

He also claims that biologically, males are Cads or Dads, and explains the differences between the rapists and nice guys as exhibiting these two evolutionary strategies. He explores the evolution of sexual jealousy and the drive to rape, concluding that because it’s because of a prioritizing of evolutionary fitness that in no society do women obsess over the virginity of gooms (397). He will never concede that this might have something to do with social power, rather than reproduction, and so has nothing to say about the raping of little boys or prepubescent girls. Men just naturally can’t see “abrupt unsolicited sex with a stranger to be repugnant rather than appealing” (405). Apparently, men would all love to be raped.

Women don’t like to be raped, according to P, because evolutionarily we’re designed to want to produce fit children, and we experience “agony” when that principle is violated (398). It’s not the pain and coercion and weight of the cultural baggage -- it’s our hope for kids that win at evolution.

P pooh-poohs the feminist responses to rape which point out how power is at play, and not simply lust (406). This “preposterous” claim is just a Marxist penchant to explain all phenomenon as a struggle for power between groups. And with an extra boost of smarm, he corrects us: “But if I may be permitted an ad feminam suggestion, the theory that rape has nothing to do with sex may be more plausible to a gender to whom a desire for impersonal sex with an unwilling stranger is too bizarre to contemplate” (406). The upswing of all this Marxist feminism is the “campus rape bureaucracy” won’t give the young ladies good advice about dressing modestly and behaving yourself at parties so others can’t take advantage of you (406). “Because of the sacred belief [that rape isn’t the victim’s fault], rape counselors foist advice on students that no responsible parent would ever give a daughter” (406).

Bullshit like this makes me want to enforce Jill Filipovic’s suggestion: “if conservative and anti-feminist men continue to argue that women’s very public presence enables men to assault them, then perhaps they’re the ones who should be pressured to stay home.”

He’ll also throw out some great lines like “men are more likely to find themselves at the receiving end of

racism" (525). No really, there was a Study.

Progress Comes from People like Steve Pinker:

Why did people begin to believe in human kindness? Well: they just started thinking hard about it (180). And of course the ones thinking were the privileged, white, male thinkers. they're the ones who made us play nice. Our distaste for slavery is owed to William Wilburforce, not Harriet Tubman. P is, incidentally, one of these people, using his thoughts to move us all toward progress.

Even when he concedes that some popular movements have been beneficial, that is because of some Great Man who led them, and that great man got the idea from the Great Books (he actually goes through MLK's philosophical reading list) (479).

This is also where P shows his (anti-Marxist) Hegelian stripes: what the little people do is meaningless -- we can only hope they catch up to the civilizing power of these beautiful white brains.

Adjusting all violence to per-capita:

It's undisputed that more people are being killed, but your chance of being killed as a random person in the world is arguably reduced.

It's an interesting question whether rates or amounts are more important. It's possible to ask: could it just be that at a certain point it's too difficult to keep up with birthrates when it comes to killing others? We just don't have the technologies to do away with people as quickly as new ones are created -- is this progress if so?

But the bigger question for me is how this prioritizes mass populations. If there is a small tribe wiped out through genocide, that is still just as horrible as it would be if there were fewer people. Wiping out a village in a dirty war is still wiping out a village, even though New York exists.

What it comes down to is that P could show how the Aztec empire had a low death-through-violence rate, and a neighboring tribe had a high rate, and say See states are more peaceful. When what actually happened is the State massacred the tribe.

(A Utah senator once argued that being gay was bad because you were more likely to be murdered -- instead of concluding that being homophobic is bad because you're more likely to murder.)

Making meaning and meaninglessness:

P can't edit his arguments down -- he's writing 800 pages, after all, everything in!

Like: remember that Dr. Seuss story, where a man was "nearly beheaded for being unable to remove his hat in the presence of the king"? Now that's violent.

Or: Let me tell you why the 60's was so violent with this Wikipedia quote about that wild party. Also quoted in the Wikipedia quote is "[citation needed]" (113).

I mean, come on, you're not even moving these to a footnote?

But P will find his argument anywhere. I had heard of Lewis Fry Richardson before as a kind of tragically comic figure, who tried to figure out the mathematics of war and got nowhere. But P finds this positively instructive: he couldn't figure out a mathematical formula for war, ergo: war is random. So if we've had the most destructive wars in history in the last century, well, that's all chance, that was bound to happen sometime (207). Our current episodes of violence, like the 20th century wars, are just RANDOM occurrences. Some decade had to be the bloodiest, after all! But all the other violence? It has REASONS. (191)

World War II and the holocaust were basically just the doing of one bad apple. Take away Hitler and viola, peace and understanding (249). Hitler is credited with possessing magical powers to make people behave badly. This can of course be a comforting thought -- you no longer have to hold everyone else to any responsibility (so what if the churches and the social clubs all happily participated? they were hypnotized into it by the dashing Hitler). This also fits with his outdated Great Man theory of history.

He'll strain to create patterns out of scant data, and when the obvious patterns don't fit (like, suppose that war has, over time, claimed the lives of more and more people. Suppose the very most deadly wars came after the Enlightenment enlightened us and most players were "democracies") -- then he'll spend pages and pages kneading the statistics into chaos, until he can say: "The two world wars were, in a sense, horrifically unlucky samples from a statistical distribution that stretches across a vast range of destruction." (222)

And maybe he's right, but if so, every murder is a horrifically unlucky sample also, and he's severely compromised his attempts to make tidy morals to the story.

His data is also unconvincing when he's talking about the revolution in animal rights. He basically tells us to look at all that faux-meat at the supermarket. If he were to track the number of animal killings or meat consumption anywhere in the world, we clearly wouldn't be very optimistic, and so he ignores those numbers and instead tracks how many films harmed their animal actors.

And about cooking the books

When he's trying to make the case that democracies are less warlike, he sets up a very careful statistical analysis. And then he just throws in that for these statistics, any conflict will be attributed to the "less democratic" country in the conflict. P is living in a belligerent democratic country that is currently and historically creating wars with "less democratic" countries. I'm completely in support of democracy, but this ain't no Norway fighting Germany. How could he feasibly have written these paragraphs without worry that he was cooking the data? How could his editors and readers have feasibly let him get away with this? Isn't it better to admit that some democracies can be warmongering, and do some hard thinking to figure out why that is, rather than just wash it of responsibility?

Love affair with enlightenment and capitalism

He finally gets to his real argument, which is that capitalism is peace. We don't bomb the Japanese because they made my minivan. He says the good arguments for this are "sure to leave leftists speechless." Ha ha, remember when we used to call capitalists "merchants of death"? And so if we're now in corporate-fueled resource wars at the behest of war profiteers -- well, that's clearly the "less democratic" country's fault, for not simply handing their resources over to our CEOs to begin with.

His love affair with corporatocracy is further clarified when he rejects the United Nations as a "soap box for dictators" and instead promotes IGOs as the answer (289). You might think it's odd, with his previous

assertion that democracy is important for peace, that he would see the future of peace as coming from non-democratic IGOs like the World Bank. But in the end, he only supports “democracy” inasmuch as it supports free-market capitalism, which is the real ultimate goal. The democratic part can be skipped completely if we can get to corporate governance in a faster war.

Anything that gets in the way of the free functioning of markets is sure to cause violence. Also, it’s sure to be an ideology. An ideology is a different thing that some people have, particularly if they’re communists, while P and his book are free of ideology (556).

He blames communist ideas for Stalhlinism and the violence of the 60s, but when he’s up against the violence of the French Revolution, which clearly grew out of his precious Enlightenment ideas, he’ll say, with characteristic smarm, that the connection between the two is “to put it mildly, dubious” (184). “Political murder, massacre, and wars of imperial expansion are as old as civilization, and had long been the everyday stuff of European monarchies.” In other words: shit happens. You can’t blame ideas for that. UNLESS that shit is utopian, and then it’s an “ideology.”

Marx can be blamed for Hitler, his “fraternal twin” (343). Sure, Hitler hated Marx, but we have some proof that he read a book by him, and basically the holocaust is just a tweaked class war. They’re both counter-enlightenment doctrine.

This is when his ire toward Vietnam comes out. Those “expansionist” jerks only beat us because they had an ideology and so didn’t care about human lives anymore (308). “The American democracy was willing to sacrifice a tiny fraction of the lives that the North Vietnamese dictator was willing to forfeit (no one asked the [Vietnamese] men how they felt about this).” Fortunately, now that they’ve sloughed off most of their ideology, and are instead “commercial” (which is ideology-free terrain), they’re less interested in these “unnecessary wars” and we can all have a little peace.

I’ve seen a lot of victim-blaming in my days, but never anything so blatant and disgusting as this.

But Marx is to blame for all the anti-communist “reactions” he caused in Indonesia and Latin America (not the democratic and free market US) (343). “The decline of genocide is the decline of communism” (343), and if those genocidal acts were happening at the behest of US puppet dictators against indigenous communities suspected of harboring communist sentiments, you can’t blame capitalism for that.

And of course capitalism is in no way to blame for wars of plunder and colonization. Those don’t even happen anymore, anyway. He proves this by showing that countries rich in oil are among the most violent (674) (he ignores the obvious fact that other countries might be trying to plunder their oil).

Of course, P would like to find psychological research supporting his idea that people engaging in commerce are less violent. But unfortunately it doesn’t exist. Why? “I suspect that among researchers, gentle commerce is just not a sexy idea” (684). Intellectuals, he concludes, feel too superior to businessmen to actually study the idea.

Burying Truth:

“In absolute numbers, of course, civilized societies are matchless in the destruction they have wreaked. But --”(47)

“Europe’s ability to kill people [through the present] outpaced its ability to breed more of them. But --”(230)  
“European governments may have brutalized the natives when conquering a colony and putting down

revolts, but --"(307).

"The law may be an ass, but --"(538)

Howard Zinn wrote:

"Outright lying or quiet omission takes the risk of discovery which, when made, might arouse the reader to rebel against the writer. To state the facts, however, and then to bury them in a mass of other information is to say to the reader with a certain infectious calm: yes, mass murder took place, but it's not that important--it should weigh very little in our final judgments; it should affect very little what we do in the world."

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## Warwick says

VIOLENCE HAS DECLINED, AND I WILL KICK THE LIVING SHIT OUT OF ANYONE WHO SAYS IT HASN'T

Disappointingly, Pinker strikes a slightly less confrontational tone than that, but the basic idea is the same. His thesis is that violence of every kind, from international warfare down to murder and corporal punishment, has been on a steady decline throughout human history, up to and including the present day – and not only does he make this case in considerable detail, but he goes on to give a very wide-ranging discussion of possible political and psychological causes for what's happened. This book is big, and it needs to be: it's built around a vast accumulation of raw evidence. Historical, statistical, sociological, neurobiological, and anecdotal – and I'm slightly confused by some of the negative reviews here, because although you might not like all of his conclusions, it's not easy to argue with the facts when they're laid out in this much detail.

Not convinced? Wondering if village life in the 30s can really have been as bad as dodging rapists in today's inner cities? Well, prepare for approximately 8,266 graphs and charts proving you wrong in every direction. Leafing through them is at first daunting, then fascinating, then astonishing, and eventually wearying. But they keep coming!

The decline in some forms of violence is so dramatic that the figures have had to be plotted on a logarithmic scale, so vertiginous is their descent. Hitting kids – gone from normal to unacceptable in barely a generation. Murder rates? Dropping like a knackered lift. Paedophiles and child abduction? Statistically speaking, if you wanted your child to have a better-than-average chance of being abducted and held overnight by a stranger, 'you'd have to leave it outside unattended for 750,000 years'. Terrorism, surely? Nope; in fact 'the number of deaths from terrorist attacks is so small that even minor measures to avoid them can *increase* the risk of dying' – one study suggests that 1,500 more Americans died in the year after 9/11 because they started driving rather than flying.

Okay then, what about WAR. 'As of May 15, 1984, the major powers of the world had remained at peace with one another for the longest stretch of time since the Roman Empire.' This is important, because interstate warfare is much, much more deadly than the small-'n'-nasty invasions and civil wars that are more common today. And even they are becoming less frequent and less individually deadly.

Don't get me wrong, this is not a happy-clappy book about mindless optimism, and he is assiduous in

stressing that the situation could easily change.

The point is not that we have entered an Age of Aquarius in which every last earthling has been pacified forever. It is that substantial reductions in violence *have* taken place, and it is important to understand them.

Pinker takes a good, long look at several possibilities, and (to my mind at least) identifies three major factors behind the decline. The first is the growth of democracy, which strongly correlates with lower rates of violence across the board, and we get the figures to prove it. The second is the revolution in communications, firstly during the Enlightenment, and then more recently with the birth of the mass media age. Again, huge numbers of studies are adduced to make the point.

The third factor is what he calls ‘feminization’: women are just less violent than men, and the more involved they are in a society the more peaceful it is. ‘We are all feminists now,’ he concludes, after a typically detailed examination of changing attitudes to, and rights of, women through history. (He is talking about the West here, but even elsewhere the trend is unmistakeable.) Studies suggest that this is not just a *consequence* of changing attitudes, but a *cause* of them, particularly given that ‘the one great universal in the study of violence is that most of it is committed by fifteen-to-thirty-year-old men.’ Pinker hones in on the obvious implications:

Would the world be more peaceful if women were in charge? The question is just as interesting if the tense and mood are changed. Has the world become more peaceful because more women are in charge? And will the world become more peaceful when women are even more in charge? The answer to all three, I think, is a qualified yes.

When he's finished considering social movements and political changes, he pokes inside your brain. We have pages and pages of various neuro-sociological experiments where people were strapped to an MRI machine and told to slap a puffin in the face, or something, so that various lobes and cortices could be identified and examined. The question is whether there are anatomical, or evolutionary-psychological, causes for violence, and if so how easily they can be overcome. We get a lot of impressive-looking diagrams like this (I may have remembered some of the details wrong):

Pinker is very interesting on the Flynn Effect, which, if you're not aware of it, is the upward trend in general intelligence observed around the world in standardised testing since such things began. Many people that have written on this subject are skeptical that folk nowadays can really be smarter than anatomically-identical humans of a few generations ago, despite what the tests say – but Pinker, after a careful examination of how thought processes are influenced by changing social norms, is not afraid to draw his conclusions, at least in the ethical sphere:

The other half of the sanity check is to ask whether our recent ancestors can really be considered morally retarded. The answer, I am prepared to argue, is yes. Though they were

surely decent people with perfectly functioning brains, the collective moral sophistication of the culture in which they lived was as primitive by modern standards as their mineral spas and patent medicines are by the medical standards of today. Many of their beliefs can be considered not just monstrous but, in a very real sense, stupid.

Obviously we are into speculative territory here, but I actually found it very heartening and thought-provoking to see someone prepared to follow the evidence that far.

How's it written? His style is exact without being dense, although he is not averse to the odd cliché ('capital punishment itself was on death row'), and from time to time his desire to cloak the science in colourful imagery leads him into some awkward prose:

The age distribution of a population changes slowly, as each demographic pig makes its way through the population python.

Yikes. Also...and this may sound like a weird thing to pick up on, but once I noticed it I couldn't take my eyes off it...he is absolutely obsessed with telling the reader to 'recall' things he's already said.

Recall the mathematical law that a variable will fall into a power-law distribution...

Recall from chapter 3 that the number of political units in Europe shrank...

Recall that there were two counter-Enlightenments...

Recall that the statistics of deadly quarrels show no signature of war-weariness.

...and recall that duelling was eventually laughed into extinction.

Recall that the chance that two people in a room of fifty-seven will share a birthday is ninety-nine out of a hundred.

England and the United States, recall, had prepared the ground for their democracies...

Recall that for half a millennium the wealthy countries of Europe were constantly at each other's throats.

Cronin, recall, showed that terrorist organizations drop like flies over time...

And recall the global Gallup survey that showed...

Recall that narcissism can trigger violence...

Recall that the insula lights up when people feel they have been shortchanged...

Patients with orbital damage, recall, are impulsive...

Recall from chapter 3 the theory of crime...

Just how much stuff are you expecting me to remember, Pinker?! And surely someone who wrote three books on language has a fucking thesaurus handy?

There are a couple of minor errors, too, that an editor should have caught. The Polish city of Wrocław is printed in my edition as 'Wroctaw'; and he also refers to some statistics gathered in the 'town of Kent' (there are dozens of towns in Kent, which in the dataset concerned is a county).

However, and despite my sometimes flippant tone in this review, the truth is that I thought this was a magnificent book – convincingly argued and truly multidisciplinary, so that I felt like I was getting a synthesis of the important studies carried out in half a dozen different fields. It's a big, serious argument that deserves proper consideration, and one that'll give you some ammo to argue back next time you're feeling cynical about the relentless news headlines. I think it's a clear 4.5 – and since Goodreads won't let me do that, I'm inclined to bump it up rather than down.

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## Richard says

Steven Pinker certain ranges widely in intellectual circles. Although he is nominally a professor of psychology at Harvard, but even with specialties (per Wikipedia) in experimental psychology, cognitive science, linguistics, he somehow dove into history to present one of the best TED Talks, back in 2007: *Steven Pinker on the myth of violence* (watch those nineteen minutes, if you haven't already).

Wonderfully, he has now followed that presentation up with an entire volume.

Peter Singer wrote the glowing review of this book for the New York Times, and that somewhat lengthy essay is itself well worth reading: *Is Violence History?* .

Update — the Autumn 2011 issue of the excellent pop sociology quarterly *The Wilson Quarterly* also enthusiastically recommends the book (with minor caveats) in *Peace on Earth* .

Update — Just got this from the library; must read within three weeks since the number of holds will prevent me from renewing. Curiously, the podcast I was listening to on the way to the library was on a related topic. The U.C. Berkeley School of Law professor (and socioologist) Franklin Zimring wrote an article back in August on the precipitous decline in crime in New York City, and was interviewed by the charming SciAm editor Steve Mirsky, *The City That Became Safe: What New York Teaches about Urban Crime and Its Control* . Check it out!

Update — just stumbled on a brief Q&A with the Economist here. Poked around and found a review, also covering A History of Violence: From the End of the Middle Ages to the Present, titled *Punchline* ; and a summation by the Economist blogger Buttonwood at *A Cause for Celebration* .

Yet another update — since I bought the book, I'm hoping to read it again after I finish a few others. Meanwhile, I've found a few other reviews and interviews.

The philosopher Nigel Warburton interviews Steven Pinker on the *Social Science Bites* podcast. A transcript of the interview is here, along with a downloadable PDF or audio MP3.

Pinker was interviewed on the Charlie Rose Show.

A review of the book on the GuardianUK Observer column by John Naughton, Steven Pinker: fighting talk from the prophet of peace.

An audio interview from the GuardianUK's Science Weekly podcast.

A text interview with author Sam Harris (who is Pinker's friend and wrote the introduction to Pinker's book),

Twilight of Violence.

A vigorously negative review (albeit simplistic and misguided, in my quick, and as-yet contingent appraisal) by the philosopher John Gray in Prospect Magazine, *Delusions of peace*.

Finally, the book's Wikipedia page has additional citations in the praise and criticism sections.

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### **Nebuchadnezzar says**

When an academic steps outside his or her field of expertise, it's best to brace yourself for a torrent of nonsense. Steven Pinker, whose work in linguistics and psychology I greatly enjoy, has made a habit of using that work as a springboard to foist his pet political theories on the public. Whereas his previous attempt in *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* was a vehicle for his ideological ramblings, it was at least not based on a gaping statistical flaw and had some value in refuting common misconceptions, even if it did so in a fundamentally dishonest way.

Whatever redeeming qualities to be found in *Better Angels* are far outweighed by the failure of Pinker's thesis. Has violence actually declined? If not, the rest is window dressing. Pinker quickly notes that the reader will be skeptical of his thesis off the bat -- we are inclined to believe the world is getting more violent due to our constant exposure to it in the media, which is biased toward reporting bad news, criminality, etc. No doubt he is correct in this. It is well known that crime rates in the United States have been in decline for the past 20-30 years yet many continue to believe that crime is on the rise. This likely comes from a bit of selective reporting mixed with confirmation bias; the proverbial man searching for his keys under the streetlight.

The main reason I was immediately skeptical about this thesis was that I had seen it before! The general thrust of Pinker's argument appears in a brief section in *The Blank Slate* and a TED talk he adapted that into a few years back. ([http://www.ted.com/talks/steven\\_pinker...](http://www.ted.com/talks/steven_pinker...)) Here he totally mangles basic anthropology and archaeology. The chart he presents is a misinterpretation of data from Lawrence Keeley's *War Before Civilization* -- anyone familiar with the societies he presents knows that most of them are not nomadic hunter-gatherer bands but partly or fully sedentary and horticulturalist, e.g., the Gebusi and Yanomamo. (As an aside, I find the use of Keeley ironic as he argues against a biological view of warfare in the book while Pinker is an ardent supporter of this view.) Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jetha devote an entire section to deconstructing this *Sex at Dawn: The Prehistoric Origins of Modern Sexuality* (a book not without its own problems, as Ryan and Jetha play Rousseau to Pinker's Hobbes). (An adapted excerpt can be found here: <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/s...>)

Using modern hunter-gatherer societies (or at least what Pinker thinks are hunter-gatherer societies) as stand-ins for pre-historic societies is a rookie mistake. The degree to which modern hunter-gatherers have been displaced and influenced by industrial societies and nation-states has been one of the big debates over the last half-century in anthropology. Thus, whether they are representative of some "state of nature" at all is highly questionable. (See this brief summary of the "hunter-gatherer revisionist debate" by Thomas N. Headland for an overview and references: <http://www.sil.org/~headlandt/huntgat...>) Pinker notes this at one point but then completely forgets about it in taking his own cooked numbers at face value.

Even if we accept Pinker's definition of violence, the whole undertaking itself is an exercise in guesswork

and absurdity. There were no census programs or bureaus of statistics throughout much of history. Written records of war often inflate or deflate the body count depending on whose side you're reading from (and as we know, winners write the history books) and the archaeological record is spotty in a large number of places. Perhaps we can get fairly accurate body counts here and there, but there are large swaths of history that we essentially have to just guess at. Fortunately, the good folks at Quodlibeta, actual historians, have broken down a good deal of the historical and statistical flaws in the book (starting here): <http://bedejournal.blogspot.com/2011/...>

Considering he has been "refining" this argument since *The Blank Slate* (read: futilely polishing a turd), Pinker seems unlikely to back down. His FAQ released to "respond" to criticism completely dodges the fact that he's pulled a good deal of his numbers straight from his nether region. (See Quodlibeta again for an appropriately snarky take-down: <http://bedejournal.blogspot.com/2011/...>) At some point, it begins to stretch credulity that he doesn't realize there's a hole big enough to drive an eighteen-wheeler through in this argument. (This does, however, make the book a useful litmus test to see which critics will gush how "thoroughly researched, amply documented, and strongly argued" something is as long as you flash a few fancy charts 'n graphs and pseudo-intellectual smoke and mirrors their way. Unfortunately, it seems that the answer is "A whole lot of them.")

Once you realize the entire book is a house of cards that's more or less already collapsed, the rest of it becomes an incredible grind. As above, the rest is just window dressing, a game of make believe. Sure, there's some interesting parts about, say, the psychology of aggression and a few delicious nuggets and tidbits of trivia along the way. Digging through the rough for them seems a rather pointless exercise, though, especially where it's already been done better. Large chunks of his argument are recycled from other authors such as Peter Singer and Lynn Hunt.

The end result is a whiggish history where sense and nonsense blend together seamlessly, thus negating any use the layperson might find in it. The presentation of history too often crosses into the cartoonish, being loaded down with ad hoc theorizing deployed to save the book's overarching narrative. Pinker's goal is, at base, to push his ideology, his own brand of secular humanism he claims to be based in "Enlightenment values." It is an ideology whose values I happen to largely share, but history demonstrates that anything can be taken too far. This is why Pinker is forced to downplay or omit the excesses of the Enlightenment such as the French Revolution with its Jacobins and Cult of Reason.

The irony here is that Pinker reveals himself to be as much of a romantic as his ideological opponents. The doomsayers appeal to a mythical past to buttress their claims (Arthur Herman has written an amusing account of this phenomenon in *The Idea of Decline in Western History*), but the optimists of modernity similarly appeal to a mythical future. While the notion that the kids these days are just rotten and the world is going to hell in a hand-basket has been with us for millennia, one of the central narratives of modernity has been a belief in a steady incline. With an increasingly global economy and the inevitable advance of science and technology, the high priests of modernity preach time and again, we are surely on our way to the best of all worlds. Predicting the future direction of humanity, though, has proven to be a fool's game, a bit of off-track betting for the intellectual class.

While Pinker never commits to this teleological narrative wholesale, he does bang the drum for the steady march of progress quite a bit throughout the book. Obviously, while I don't pine for the days of King Cotton or colonial Africa, I don't find much comfort in the fact that while the number of debt and sex slaves has exploded in absolute numbers, their proportion of the total population has decreased. Oh, how marvelous!

What Bjorn Lomborg did for environmental issues, Pinker has done for the history of violence.

