

Make Money, Not War

Steven Pinker's The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined

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Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking Adult, 2011) is one of the most ambitious contributions to social science produced to date. In this heavily referenced, small-print tome of more than seven hundred pages, Pinker seeks not only to demonstrate that human violence has declined substantially throughout human history but also to identify the reasons for this decline. In addition, his treatment of the sociobiology of violence might itself constitute a stand-alone work on this important topic. Not even a lengthy review essay can do justice to such an ambitious work. I confine myself here for the most part to highlighting its many strengths and some of its weaknesses from a classical-liberal perspective.

Pinker's thesis is easy to summarize. In spite of the gloom and doom that attend current intellectual discourse, the world has become a much more peaceful place, and we are living in the most peaceful period in mankind's history. This decline in violence is not a stand-alone phenomenon; it has coincided with a movement toward equal treatment of people of all races, women, children, and gays and even toward more considerate treatment of animals.

Much to the chagrin of the "anthropologists of peace," Pinker provides persuasive evidence that premodern humans were anything but peaceful. For example, he

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notes that war-associated cannibalism may have been so widespread that it has given us genes that protect us against cannibalism-mediated prion diseases. What might be gained by portraying premodern humans and modern hunter-gatherers (and even chimpanzees) as inherently peaceful is unclear, but such a portrayal may be important for politically motivated scientists who seek to discredit modern Western culture and seek funding for pet political projects.

A more credible and understandable challenge is that the carnage and genocide that the Communists and National Socialists inflicted during the twentieth century render optimism about a decline in violence moot, if not perverse. Pinker is not insensitive to the collectivist horrors that plagued the past century, but he presents sobering evidence that “total war” and genocide are far from rare in human history and were frequently a source of pride and celebration, not shame. Adjusting for increased population size, the death toll of World War II ranks ninth among history’s worst documented atrocities. Thus, the twentieth-century outbursts of violence and murder did not reverse the overall trend toward less violence. In the late twentieth century and the post–Cold War period in particular, the continuing decline in violence seems almost surreal by historical standards, as the number of great wars and the killing power of each war declined—a phenomenon Pinker calls the “Long Peace.” To grasp the breathtaking nature of this Long Peace, consider the following statistics from Pinker’s book:

Use of nuclear weapons since 1945: **zero**

Number of direct confrontations between the two Cold War superpowers on the battlefield: **zero**

Number of times the great powers have fought each other since 1953: **zero**

Interstate wars between western European countries since World War II: **zero**

Interstate wars between major developed countries since 1945: **zero**

Expansions of territory by developed countries since the late 1940s: **zero**

Number of internationally recognized states that have gone out of existence through conquest since World War II: **zero**

Pinker takes care to point out that “there is no law of Conservation of Violence” (p. 252) in which the decline of violence in one part of the world is offset by the increase in other parts in the world. Despite regional differences in violence, the general trend has been a reduction all over the world.

This fact raises an important question: *Why* has violence declined? For Pinker, the prevalence of aggression in the rest of the animal world (which most of us take for granted) and mankind’s violent history should prompt us to ask not “Why is there war?” but “Why is there peace?” Consideration of the latter question brings us to the difficult, complicated part of the book. Pinker takes us through human history to show how not only violence but also our perception, endorsement, and tolerance of it have progressively declined. Things that strike us as horribly barbaric today, such as

the public enjoyment of extreme torture and the annihilation of an entire population, were not unusual for our species in the past.

One challenge in identifying the causes of the remarkable declines in violence and cruelty is that we must take care not to attribute them to the advent of more peaceful dispositions. As Pinker so eloquently puts it, “[T]he challenge is to find an exogenous change that precedes the change in sensibilities and behavior so we can avoid the circularity of saying that people stopped doing cruel things because they got less cruel” (p. 169). He resists explaining the decline of violence according to a single unified perspective and instead identifies a number of reasons. I focus here on three causes of the decline in violence: gentle commerce, reason, and Leviathan.

Gentle Commerce

That commerce fosters peace is almost self-evident to classical-liberal writers and many economists. Capitalism substitutes trade for force, encourages empathy by placing individuals in the position of (potential) customers (“a free market puts a premium on empathy” [p. 77]), encourages amity between citizens of trading nations, and puts a premium on the use and development of reason by encouraging proportional and probabilistic thinking. Moreover, capitalism, unlike socialism, can also incorporate some of our “darker” traits, such as competitiveness and status seeking, without leading people into messy fights. “In a world in which wealth grows out of exchange, credit, and a division of labor, conquest cannot make a conqueror richer” (p. 245), writes Pinker.

One reason why it is so difficult for many people to recognize and celebrate these aspects of commerce is that humans spent most of their history in an environment characterized by predation and zero-sum game transactions and by the associated idea that one person’s gain entails another person’s loss. Pinker also singles out religion (notably medieval Christianity) for its hostility to commerce and moneylending. This hostility lessened over the centuries, but it returned with the rise of socialism and communism, and the anticapitalist mindset remains a dominant force among today’s academics, politicians, and public officials.

One credible reason why the rise of commerce is a strong candidate for explaining the decline of violence is that capitalism did not need a deliberate collective decision or a change of human nature to emerge. As soon as a group of premodern humans stumbled on the possibility of agriculture and made a transition to permanent settlement, surplus could be traded with other humans, and the incentive to seek status through accumulation of wealth instead of through murder and mayhem could take root. Of course, such a development did not produce instantaneous peace across the board, but ongoing mutual adjustment between individuals and groups tipped the balance toward cooperation and may even have produced a situation in which using violence to further one’s interests became the worst option for everyone except

a psychopath. One important ingredient to perfect this transition from poverty and force to wealth and peace is the exercise of reason.

Reason and Evolution

If Pinker privileges one cause for the decline in violence, it is the exercise of reason. To posit reason as a driver, one needs to demonstrate either that certain exogenous events can trigger a rise in the deployment of this faculty or that humans have become smarter. Pinker is sympathetic to both perspectives. As noted previously, a random event such as the discovery of agriculture can trigger permanent settlement and start a process that confers greater rewards on rational decision making, thereby establishing a positive-feedback loop.

Pinker discusses the “Flynn effect”—a sustained increase in intelligence test scores among all populations—as a driver of the decline of violence. He reviews various explanations of this effect and looks favorably on the idea that exposure to a more stimulating, scientific environment can trigger improved abstract reasoning. One does not have to agree with Pinker’s interpretation of the Flynn effect to recognize that, as a general rule, increased intelligence favors nonviolent resolution of conflict and forms of social organization that value autonomy. The data that Pinker presents demonstrate that this relationship remains robust after one controls for other variables. He further observes that the overwhelming majority of homicides and violent crimes are committed by people in the lowest socioeconomic classes.

In one of the book’s weaker sections, Pinker considers the idea that the decline of violence (or rise in intelligence) might be the result of ongoing natural selection. More and more scholars are presenting genetic evidence that evolution did not stop when modern humans left Africa, and they have identified events that might have triggered and accelerated human evolution. Pinker cannot but confirm these findings, and his extensive treatment of the neurobiological basis of violence also forces him to recognize the heritability of aggressive tendencies, but he shows little interest in exploring natural selection as an explanation of the decline in violence, despite its potential for allowing rigorous treatment.

He calls Gregory Cochran and Henry Harpending’s seminal book *The 10,000 Year Explosion: How Civilization Accelerated Human Evolution* (2009) a “manifesto” and notes that none of the genes that have been identified have been implicated in behavior. I doubt that this argument can be dismissed so easily, however, and Pinker does not do justice to Cochran and Harpending’s argument about why we *should* expect evolution to select for differences in cognitive abilities. In his book *The Folly of Fools: The Logic of Deceit and Self-Deception in Human Life*, Robert Triver writes: “By some estimates, more than half of all genes express themselves in the brain: that is, more than ten thousand genes. This means that genetic variation for mental and behavioral traits should be especially extensive and fine-grained in our species—contra decades of social science dogma” (2011, 123).

If intelligence and self-control are associated with decreased violence, as Pinker admits, and civilization can select for increased intelligence (see Cochran, Hardy, and Harpending 2006), then it is not necessary to search for genes that directly implicate temperament or behavior, although there is nothing counterintuitive in expecting recent natural selection here, too. Pinker notes that he is not aware of much scientific evidence that ongoing natural selection can account for the decline in violence, but it seems strange that the author of *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (Pinker 2003) does not recognize that we should not expect such work to be abundant in academia.

One unpersuasive argument against natural selection's being involved in the decline of violence is that it cannot explain the *general* decline in violence among all populations. After all, populations that are less prone to violence can impose socio-economic systems that decrease violence on other populations and draw them into economic systems that alter their incentives to choose trade and cooperation over violence. In his treatment of ongoing conflict in the Third World, Pinker dryly notes that "when the colonial governments departed, they took competent governance with them" (p. 307). In fact, the imposition of modern governments on warring territories is another important cause that Pinker identifies as being responsible for the decline in violence.

Another general biological argument might explain the general decline in violence. As a society gradually adopts conventions that reward trade and cooperation over force, the use of violence has fewer reproductive advantages. In fact, however, young males, who are more prone to aggression, are disproportionately taken out of the gene pool at a young age during war. This effect holds true even in the presence of a draft because the draft itself positively selects for men who value honor and take risk. Each war therefore can change the proportion of violent people to peaceful people. Pinker does not discuss this line of reasoning, despite its being a bit of "folk wisdom" about war's effects.

One reason for the decline in violence that Pinker strongly supports is the increase in women's participation in public and political life. Even the most ardent antifeminist has to recognize that (young) men are *far more* warlike than women. Pinker offers a sociobiological explanation of this difference, attributing it to psychological differences that result from different reproductive dispositions.

One might expect Pinker to be sympathetic to the argument that the wide availability of legal abortion causes people to have fewer unwanted children, who are more likely to become criminals, but he presents a different kind of argument that has some interesting dysgenic implications:

Among women who are accidentally pregnant and unprepared to raise a child, the ones who terminate their pregnancies are likely to be forward-thinking, realistic, and disciplined, whereas the ones who carry the child to term are more likely to be fatalistic, disorganized, or immaturely focused

on the thought of a cute baby rather than an unruly adolescent. . . . The availability of abortion thus may have led to a generation that is more prone to crime because it weeded out just the children who, whether through genes or environment, were most likely to exercise maturity and self-control. (pp. 120–21)

Pinker confesses that if we reclassified all abortions as acts of violence, his case for the improved treatment of children in the West would collapse. To soften the impact of this argument, he presents evidence that the availability of legal abortion does not necessarily produce decreased sensitivity toward abortion or a slippery slope toward infanticide and may even coincide with *declining* rates of the practice.

Leviathan

Notwithstanding the government's engagement in violence, Pinker singles out the rise of *centralized* states that claim a monopoly of legitimate force as an important element in the decline of violence. He writes that "states are far less violent than traditional bands and tribes. Modern Western countries, even in their most war-torn centuries, suffered no more than around a quarter of the average death rate of nonstate societies, and less than a tenth of that for the most violent one" (p. 52).

Pinker is not naive and recognizes that the early governments were not the product of a social contract between disinterested parties seeking to solve a Hobbesian problem. The formation and consolidation of these states often reflected the same inner demons that are responsible for violence (predation, honor, sexual conquest, genocide, and so on), and "pacification" often meant nothing more than a coercive and cruel government's imposition of peace on its subjects. But Pinker puts great emphasis on the rise of democracy and "human rights" as forces that further pacified governments and reduced violence against their own subjects. To him, the predatory state is a thing of the past in the modern Western societies.

One of the problems with attributing the decline in violence to Leviathan, as Pinker himself notes, is that countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands witnessed declines in violence in the absence of strong centralization, and countries such as Italy, which were more highly centralized and commanded a substantial bureaucracy and police force, did not observe such declines in violence. He attempts to save his perspective by suggesting that the existence of a state is not sufficient; its law enforcement requires social legitimacy to produce peace.

This perspective raises several questions. If social legitimacy is a necessary condition for peaceful coexistence under Leviathan, then it is conceivable that an emerging taboo on violence and support for conventions that suppress it might be *sufficient* for social peace, even in regions with a fair degree of decentralization and policy competition. Another objection is that the rise of commerce is itself a *sufficient* condition for social peace. After all, the northern European countries that

Pinker associates with declining rates of violence, such as the Netherlands, were pioneers in trade and commerce.

One argument that commerce has going for it is that, unlike the operation of government, commerce is *itself* a peaceful activity. Comparing the pacifying consequences of commerce and democracy, Pinker observes: “The pacifying effects of commerce . . . appear to be even more robust than the pacifying effects of democracy. A democratic peace strongly kicks in only when both members of a pair of countries are democratic, but the effects of commerce are demonstrable when either member of the pair has a market economy” (p. 287).

One might argue that a powerful state is itself a necessary condition for the flourishing of commerce, but such reasoning does not conform well with historical evidence. In the rise of capitalism, we do not observe first a precapitalist Hobbesian war of all against all, then the establishment of the state, and finally the introduction of capitalism. In reality, the emergence of trade and of the social and legal conventions that support and nurture commerce arose in a “messy,” fragmentary fashion. Just as commerce encourages a social psychology that rewards interchangeability of perspective and empathy, it also triggers an interest in the emergence of conventions that promote security of private property and trade. At any rate, even if government could be justified on such grounds, it would be only a minimal government that does not use its monopoly power to favor certain groups through regulation or engage in income redistribution.

Unlike some of the other proposed explanations for the decline of violence in Pinker’s book, such as commerce and reason, further centralization and democratization seem unlikely to have produced even greater gains in nonviolence in modern Western countries. Indeed, one can argue that democracy and universal suffrage have done more to socialize force than to eliminate it. Today’s political forces that seek greater centralization and “integration” are more motivated by a desire to eliminate regulatory and tax competition than to reduce violence. A good example is the ongoing strengthening of the European Union, a transnational project that has greater appeal among political elites than among ordinary citizens. The democratic process is often skipped when it is inconvenient to elites, or citizens are repeatedly subjected to referendums on the same question until they finally give the desired (pro-centralization) answer. Pinker fortunately does not welcome the idea of world government because it will eliminate any kind of policy competition and the natural checks against stagnation and progress that come with people’s opportunity to emigrate to countries with different policies—a perspective that sets Pinker apart from many progressive cosmopolitans who consider any kind of policy competition and nativism a sign of backwardness.

Modern Crime

No matter how one looks at it, the United States has higher crime rates than most other modern Western countries. Although Pinker cannot resolve the “stark” disparity

in crime rates between ethnic populations in the United States, he notes that blacks and whites in the southern states are more violent than their counterparts in the northern states, which basically makes this difference also one between southern U.S. states and Europe. He explains this difference by positing that the American South has a strong tradition that values honor and self-enforcement of justice. A less politically correct perspective would be to hypothesize that demographic differences can affect the general nature of a legal system and produce higher crime rates for *all* populations.

A potential rejoinder that Pinker himself invites is that, in fact, more justice is being done in the southern states than in the northern states. Pinker does recognize that a substantial proportion of intercitizen violence is really after all the settling of a perceived injustice. One might argue that people in the northern states not only pay higher taxes and endure more regulations (both of which may be brought under the rubric of force), but they get less justice in return owing to the taboo against “taking the law into one’s own hands.” Pinker’s book cannot resolve such a debate because he does not distinguish between “good” and “bad” violence in a quantitative matter that allows for a more careful consideration of this topic. Higher crime rates in the southern states may also reflect stronger enforcement of laws against victimless crimes (such as drug use and prostitution) and the associated absence of impartial dispute mechanisms for people involved in these activities.

Even to those who are more sympathetic to southern antigovernment temperament and its residual resistance to complete surrender of the right to administer justice to a monopolist, the South’s stronger emphasis on militarism and honor can offset many of these advantages. When this patriotic militarism combines with northern moralism to spread democracy and egalitarianism around the world (a predictable result of political horse trading), the results can be contraproductive and impoverishing, as has been shown in many Middle Eastern and African countries.

One perspective that does not fare well in Pinker’s book is the George W. Bush style of neoconservatism that aims to spread “freedom” around the world by fire and sword. Pinker is a great supporter of democracy, but he warns about the dangers of implementing democracy in a country that has not developed the necessary cultural requirements to make it work to its citizens’ advantage. He also presents empirical evidence in support of the counterintuitive position (at least to most people) that terrorism should not be our greatest concern and that fears thereof can be easily abused to start wars or conduct policies that cause much more harm and risk than the terrorist attacks themselves. He writes, “The number of deaths from terrorist attacks is so small that even minor measures to avoid them can *increase* the risk of dying” (p. 345).

He also presents persuasive arguments that terrorism is one of the stupidest and most counterproductive strategies to advance a cause. It harms innocent people, turns the majority of people against the cause, ruins the life of the participants (if they are not killed or kill themselves), and, most important, has an atrocious record in

accomplishing anything. Classical liberalism, of course, stands apart from most ideologies in steering clear of terrorism. Indeed, it is not even associated with more benign forms of violence, such as street fighting and destruction of private property.

One might be tempted to read Pinker's book as a feel-good book for the baby-boomer generation, but such a reading would be unfair. After considering a number of explanations for the rise in crime in the 1960s, he is not unsympathetic to the idea that the protest generation's glorification of darkness, the relaxation of self-control, and the emphasis on doing one's own thing contributed to the transient rise in violent crime. However, these countercultural movements probably had much less influence on crime than the progressive criminologists and politicians who aimed to reduce poverty rather than crime under the mistaken assumption that crime is driven by poverty—an idea that does not survive Pinker's close scrutiny. He even notes that “centuries ago, rich people were as violent as poor people, if not more so” (p. 81). Higher incarceration rates have one undeniable effect: criminals are physically removed from an environment in which they can harm innocent people. This effect of incarceration holds true regardless of one's beliefs about the origin of crime. Pinker even offers qualified support for Broken Windows policing. We might note, however, that the rise of crime in 1960s and its (mysterious) decline since the 1990s roughly coincided with, first, the rise of socialism and then the rise of “neoliberalism” in the West.

Of course, we have scarcely entered an era in which the state considers its classical function of providing peace and security to be its most important duty and decides to go further only when it has achieved this objective. In an appraisal of self-help justice and the modern state's crime-fighting abilities, social philosopher Anthony de Jasay writes: “With the irresistible rise of political correctness, the condemnation of all violence became nearly absolute. Legislators and opinion makers went to extraordinary lengths to discourage it. It is fair to say, though, that the effort was directed at the defenders of person and property rather than at the attackers” (2001, 278).

Conservative writers such as the late Samuel Francis believe that the modern managerial state produces a state of “anarchotyranny” in which government gives priority to enforcement of regulations, thought-crime laws, and antidiscrimination laws over the protection of law-abiding citizens. The allocation of substantial amounts of tax money to the state's nonclassical objectives without fulfilling its mandate to fight crime is one of the characteristic features of many modern urban governments and, to libertarian anarchists, a predictable result of the abuse that comes from having a monopoly on the legitimate use of force.

Debt Bondage

Pinker's book follows in the footsteps of James L. Payne's *A History of Force* (2004) in identifying the treatment of debtors as a manifestation of our decreased tolerance of

force. Pinker even writes that the practice of debt bondage is “closely related to slavery” (p. 156). Readers of the *Independent Review* would not hesitate to recognize that the proper response to a debt default should exclude extreme forms of bondage, violence, and sadism, but Pinker seems to have a rather blasé attitude toward the injustice that is being done by not paying off one’s debts. He writes that “the trend in bankruptcy law has been away from punishing debtors or *squeezing* assets out of them and toward *giving* them the opportunity of a fresh start” (p. 157, emphasis added). At this point, one wonders what has happened to the idea of justice (getting one’s money or property back as promised) and who is actually involved in “giving” debtors a fresh start—not always the creditors, I suspect!

Contrast this perspective with Murray Rothbard’s view:

The debtor who refuses to pay his debt has stolen the property of the creditor. . . . Bankruptcy laws, which discharge the debt in defiance of the property rights of the creditor, virtually confer a license to steal upon the debtor. In the pre-modern era, the defaulting debtor was generally treated as a thief and forced to pay as he acquired income. Doubtless the penalty of imprisonment went far beyond proportional punishment and hence was excessive, but at least the old legal ways placed responsibility where it belonged: on the debtor to fulfill his contractual obligations and to make the transfer of the property owed to the creditor-owner. . . . There can then be no legal situation in which a majority of creditors compel a minority to “forgive” their own claims. (1982, 144–45)

Pinker discusses the emergence of mechanisms such as credit ratings as more benign means of preventing creditors from suffering losses, but he neglects to mention that these credit ratings themselves became politicized and lost much of their force when government and activist groups pressured banks and creditors to issue loans and mortgages to individuals who were high credit risks. Indeed, this policy has been identified as one of the factors that contributed to the housing bust and the associated financial crisis of recent years. The Establishment’s insensitivity toward people who honor their debt obligations and the avalanche of bailouts for people and institutions that benefitted from relaxed lending standards has triggered a political movement (the Tea Party) that strongly rebels against the government’s socialization of debts and its picking of winners and losers in the marketplace.

Civil Rights and Liberty

Pinker generally presents opposing arguments and alternative explanations despite his own ideological leanings. In particular, he treats (secular) conservative arguments with respect—even calling Burkean conservatism “itself a fine application of reason”

and “a small tweaking of Enlightenment humanism” (p. 240)—and sometimes recognizes their merit.

In a chapter about the “rights revolutions,” he documents the undeniable progress in the treatment of ethnic minorities, women, children, gay people, and animals. There is no plausible reason to suspect that Pinker has more sympathy for one rights revolution than another (allowing for a more nuanced perspective on animal rights), but his treatments of these different but connected revolutions sometimes differ in tone. Whereas he injects critical remarks about radical feminism, presents a daring sociobiological treatment of infanticide, and takes off the gloves in discussing the excessive national obsession with children’s safety, the section on civil rights and racial discrimination is the most politically correct part of the book. A biological perspective, brought to bear in his discussion of rape and infanticide, makes no appearance here, and he identifies the excesses of the civil rights movement and affirmative action only briefly to illustrate how far we have come toward inclusivity. Pinker is well aware that “prejudice” and “stereotypes” are not the whole story, but his treatment does little to dig deeper.

Classical liberals have a more qualified view of civil rights. When government-mandated legal barriers that prevented minorities and women from participating in public life were removed, classical liberals welcomed their removal, and indeed they often campaigned actively for such changes. But legislation that aims to prohibit “discrimination” in the private sector creates a major tension with core classical-liberal values. First, a fundamental distinction in classical liberalism is that between the *withholding of a benefit* and the *active harming* of a person. Many instances of discrimination in the private sector involve a business owner who is perceived to discriminate against members of a certain group for reasons that the state does not deem acceptable, even if no coercion is involved. In essence, antidiscrimination laws applied to the private sector transform private property into public property. Second, a competitive economy selects against irrational discrimination in the form of higher wage costs and lower profits. This pressure may not eliminate discrimination completely, but it will progressively tilt the economy toward nondiscrimination over time. Antidiscrimination law discourages this impartial process by substituting force for market mechanisms—an approach that, under the influence of pressure groups, can easily collapse into “positive discrimination.” Third, discrimination driven by “prejudice” and discrimination that results from a sober assessment of statistical differences are not the same thing. One classical-liberal view holds that contemporary antidiscrimination legislation conflicts with one of the most human qualities of all: the exercise of reason in individual decision making. In his article “The Antidiscrimination Paradigm: Irrational, Unjust, and Tyrannical,” Ben O’Neill writes: “The antidiscrimination paradigm’s goal and logical consequence are not merely political egalitarianism, but epistemological egalitarianism. The doctrine seeks not merely to secure the egalitarian provision of certain services and opportunities, but also to prevent the use of any anthropic conceptual distinctions, with political egalitarianism as a consequence of this wider aim” (2009, 547).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, many Western governments required people to discriminate, and at the end of that century many Western governments forced people *not* to discriminate. Government seems to be constitutionally incapable of getting this issue right, and the practice of affirmative action is a good example of the dangerous tendency toward ethnic-relations engineering.

A government can prefer one group of people over another in many ways and by many degrees, but only one policy expresses a neutral position. We should not be surprised, then, that we almost invariably find certain groups receiving special privileges. A public-choice analysis of government discrimination sees competing politicians “purchasing” political support by conferring privileges on certain groups, most notably in income policies, but subtle ethnic politicking is not beyond many politicians’ repertoire. Such policies can also originate from within society when appeals to guilt can be mobilized to extract resources from other people, even if these people never took part in any of the (claimed) injustices. In an ironic twist of history, the collectivist reasoning that was the target of the original antidiscrimination movement is now the vehicle by which civil rights activists present their claims for justice. The national obsession with even the slightest indications of (latent) racism attest an ongoing, if not intensifying, obsession with race among opinion makers and the political class.

Institutionalized Force

Pinker’s view of force strongly diverges from Payne’s in that Pinker is apparently not troubled by the force and theft associated with regulation and taxation. If one were to read Pinker’s book without an awareness of current events, one might think that modern democratic governments do little more than secure peace among citizens and ensure that everyone drives on the same side of the road. This neglect of modern states’ confiscatory and regulatory activities is the weakest aspect of Pinker’s book, especially in light of his appreciation of the classical-liberal tradition.

Whether one thinks that examining the nature of modern states should prompt Pinker to qualify some of his lofty statements about the decline of force or one expects that institutionalized force will be the last major type of force to decline in the future, the relationship of modern states to their citizens cannot be ignored. In *A History of Force*, Payne writes on the “embarrassing contradiction” between our modern rejection of force and the government’s conduct:

Society employs the threat of inflicting harm on person and property in thousands of circumstances in order to accomplish or to attempt to accomplish, what we consider to be good objectives. Our libraries, art museums, schools, and universities rely on the implicit threat of violence embedded in the tax system. The shadow of force lies heavily over most trades and professions, from plumbing to surgery, in the form of government licensing

regulations. If we fail to heed these rules, government agents will seize our property or even drag us off to jail. Most of the products we use, from headlights to hairsprays, are regulated through the threats of physical action against the person and property of those who fail to obey the relevant dictates. (2004, 4–5)

Pinker himself writes: “Early states were more like protection rackets, in which powerful Mafiosi extorted resources from the locals and offered them safety from hostile neighbors and from each other” (p. 42). And he gives examples that draw attention to the coexistence of being “offered” protection and being exploited. Consolidation of states often occurred when rulers sought to prevent the loss of revenue that would result from citizens and small kingdoms’ fighting among themselves. In this perspective, we may view the existence and persistence of modern states in a rather different light. Instead of seeing them as benevolent institutions that produce a social good that citizens cannot produce by coordination among themselves, we see the state as an institution that serves its own interest and seeks peace among its citizens only to maximize the wealth it can extract from them. As a sign on a well-known U.S. Congressman’s desk proclaims, “Don’t Steal—The Government Hates Competition!”

Social philosophers have analyzed the operation of the state as an entity with goals of its own. Perhaps the most notable such analysis is Anthony de Jasay’s *The State* ([1985] 1998). But states may also go beyond protective functions for other reasons. Economists working in the public-choice tradition have shown how democracies can give rise to considerable amounts of waste and income redistribution as a result of pressure-group politics and the economic ignorance of voters and elected officials. Bryan Caplan (2007), whose work on intelligence and economic literacy Pinker cites in his book, has presented a persuasive theory about the microfoundations of political failure. An individual voter has a negligible effect on an election’s outcome, and therefore he has little incentive to make informed decisions about socioeconomic matters. Most politicians’ poor understanding of economics mirrors the electorate’s lack of information and understanding.

Because Pinker does not provide an argument for excluding most of modern government’s activities from his treatment of force and violence, we can only speculate on the reasoning that might warrant such an approach. One might object that the taxation and income redistribution that characterize the modern democratic state cannot be characterized as force because they embody the principles that people would choose behind a Rawlsian veil of ignorance. Aside from the nontrivial challenge of deriving legitimacy for coercive income redistribution from hypothetical contracts of this kind, it is difficult for anyone to claim seriously that most of today’s regulatory and fiscal policies are aimed at implementing a just society along Rawlsian lines. In fact, some contemporary libertarians claim quite persuasively that a minimal state and laissez-faire capitalism would bring greater benefits to those at the bottom of the income ladder than do today’s mixed economies.

If we ignore the state's claim to be a source of legitimate force and include its regulatory and fiscal activities in our definition of force, how would this inclusion affect Pinker's thesis about the decline of violence? This question has no easy answer because the state's coercive activities are embodied in permanently enforced laws, which gives rise to complex measurement challenges. For example, should federal income taxation be treated as a crime that occurs once a year when income taxes are due, in each pay period, or as a form of permanent ongoing theft? How should we treat the draft ("[C]onscription is a barometer of a country's willingness to sanction the use of force" [p. 255], writes Pinker) or compulsory jury duty? This topic clearly can produce widely differing views of the nature and degree of government force, some of which might undermine Pinker's optimism about force.

One potential objection against including the government's conduct in assessments of the decline of violence is that we should be interested only in actual violence, not mere threats of force. We may safely dismiss such an objection, however, because we would not accept such a view in assessing nonstate crime. It would imply that whenever a *threat of force* against innocent people is sufficient to accomplish a goal (as in extortion and servitude), it would leave the peace unimpaired. Not only does this view conflict with our moral intuitions about force, it would also imply that a very oppressive government or criminal organization so feared that it never had to use actual violence would be classified as an agent of peace!

The logical requirement of including threats of force in a credible survey of force draws attention to the relationship between the absence of force and other value, liberty. Although some might argue that Pinker is interested in only one thing—violence—and that his focus justifies his neglect of other important values, such as liberty, classical liberals would not find such an argument very persuasive because they conceive of liberty as the absence of force (or of the threat thereof). This consideration raises a sobering question: Where is the triumph of freedom that should have accompanied the decline in violence? At least two replies might be given. One is to argue that, indeed, both a decrease in violence and an increase in freedom have occurred. A second reply is to argue that a decrease in violence has not actually occurred if the state's threats of violence are taken into account. I am inclined to take a middle position here, conceding that the second approach is too cynical and does not do justice to the elimination of barbarous practices such as extreme torture and capital punishment for trivial crimes. Nevertheless, the confiscatory tax rates and the regulations that modern states impose can hardly be identified as public policies aimed at reducing violence; they do constitute force against peaceful citizens. One naturally wonders, then, how can people who have acquired a strong distaste for violence tolerate the pervasiveness of such coercive policies?

Humans are prone to respond with much stronger moral outrage against the exercise of force than against the *threat of force*. If many citizens of a modern Western democracy declined to pay taxes and triggered the confiscations, arrests, trials, and imprisonments that their refusal would entail, the government would lose legitimacy,

even if most citizens supported taxation in principle. As documented in Pinker's book, today's culture has a low tolerance for the *actual* exercise of force. We do not like to see people being harassed, dragged out of their homes, and imprisoned without a very good reason. Even if a good reason exists, many of us feel uncomfortable about such government enforcement (as evidenced by Pinker's discussion of debt).

In modern mass democracies, the influence of a single vote decreases with the size of the electorate. When more people are brought into a political unit or a larger political unit imposes its will on a smaller political unit, the probability of a single vote's deciding an election's outcome decreases. As a consequence, one effect of "broadening the voter base" is that participation in public decision making becomes increasingly futile. The perceived futility can produce a range of consequences, including voter apathy, rational ignorance (or "rational irrationality"), and alienation. Moreover, not only will voting become increasingly futile, but so will resistance both to government force and to *threats* of force. De Jasay writes:

If the cost of rebellion is high, if the expected ("risk-adjusted") value of its success is not very much higher, and if the very possibility of collective action against the sovereign is problematical (at least in normal peacetime conditions), then two plausible conjectures suggest themselves. The equilibrium strategy of the sovereign will be to use its discretionary power to satisfy its preferences, perhaps by exploiting all its subjects in the service of some holistic end, perhaps by exploiting some of them to benefit others. The equilibrium strategy of the subjects will be, not to resist, but to obey, adjust, and profit from the opportunities for parasitic conduct that coalition forming with the sovereign at the expense of the rest of society may offer. (1997, 29)

Thus, a modern government's power rests largely on the fact that it generally does not have to exercise its monopoly of legitimate force because of public recognition that individual resistance to it is irrational. If we define peace solely as the absence of actual violence, "peace" can coexist with force on a massive scale in modern Western democracies. This condition has profound consequences for how we should think about a government's monopoly of legitimate force and its effect on violence. Yet despite the increasing powerlessness of individuals relative to the state, Payne remains optimistic that our decreasing tolerance of violence will one day include Leviathan's activities:

This evolution may take some time, but it is clearly coming. After all, what is this tax system that provides the funds for government's programs of social improvement? It is not an arrangement recently devised by high-minded social reformers applying rational and ethical principles. It is an oppressive scheme handed down to us by history's tyrants. It is

indeed paradoxical that a system with such a disreputable background should have become the foundation of the modern welfare state. It is rather like finding a day care center set up in a medieval torture chamber. The arrangement may work for a time, but there is bound to be a growing tension between sensitive modern values and the harsh violence of the ancient technology.

So it is with taxation. The extraction of funds through force and the threat of force no longer fits in with modern values. Ethically, it clashes with our distaste for violence. Culturally, it contradicts the principle that people should be free to choose their own goals and aspirations. And politically, it transgresses the trend toward kinder, gentler government. No one is willing to face this hard truth, of course, because taxation plays such a central role in modern social and economic arrangements. But the historical drift against taxation will continue, eventually leading to the discontinuation of the practice. Then our descendants will point a finger at us and, with a grating air of superiority, ask how we could have considered this use of force to be, as Supreme Court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes put it, “the price we pay for civilization.” (2004, 219)

State-of-Nature Theorizing

The Better Angels of Our Nature is sympathetic to attempts to derive modern government’s legitimacy and effectiveness from state-of-nature theorizing. Such contractarian approaches to the state’s legitimacy take a variety of forms. The idea that the state of nature resembles Rousseau’s peaceful noble savages is dismissed, however, because it contradicts empirical evidence about early hunter-gatherer societies. Pinker leans more toward the Hobbesian idea that without a strong central government, individuals (or groups of individuals) engage in preemptive violence and overreact to violence, producing a cycle of violence. He not only applies this argument to history but supposes that the weakening or fragmentation of government might produce violent anarchy in today’s world.

State-of-nature theorizing is problematic and involves various epistemological and philosophical problems. For one thing, it is insensitive to real-world trade-offs that people might make in regard to living in a state. As de Jasay writes, “If ever there were people in the state of nature, and as a matter of repeated historical fact it took violence to impose a state upon them, it seems pertinent to ask, Why does standard political theory regard it as a basic verity that they preferred the state . . . ? People who live in states have as a rule never experienced the state of nature and vice-versa, and have no practical possibility of moving from the one to the other. On what grounds, then, do people form hypotheses about the relative merits of state and state of nature?” ([1985] 1998, 19).

One of the most persistent claims about government is that it allows people to escape from a suboptimal state of nature in which they can benefit from public goods such as police and defense without contributing to them. But establishing a Leviathan with a monopoly on the legitimate use of force does little to resolve this problem and even increases the risk of free riding, as de Jasay points out:

[W]hile the intent of the social contract is to suppress free riding, its actual effect is to open up an altogether new ground on which it thrives with impunity. For the deterrent to state-of-nature free riding is the falling probability of successful public provision of a good as abuse of it by free-riding increases. When the necessary contributions for successful public provision are assured by coercion, no such check operates and free riding is never too risky. Risk, in fact, enters people's calculations with the opposite sign: from a check upon free riding it turns it into a spur.

All must now try and wrest free-rider benefits through the social-choice process, for if some do not others would presumably get away with securing bigger ones at their expense. . . . Free-rider behavior thus becomes preventive and defensive, a matter of prudence. (1989, 243)

Even if we can establish that, other things being equal, a centralized state with a monopoly of the use of force constitutes an improvement over the state of nature, taxation and regulation in a state can become so burdensome that many individuals would be better off under a form of ordered anarchy, where person and property receive protection from social conventions and from competing protection agencies subject to consumer preferences. Such an alternative might be “suboptimal” compared to an idealized state yet preferable to a state whose protection is coupled with excessive income redistribution and regulation.

Even if no plausible anarchist alternative could have decreased violence and crime to the levels achieved by the centralizing states of the past, this historical reality does not imply that decentralized, autonomy-respecting solutions cannot provide superior alternatives today. Pinker himself admits that at some stage of the civilizing process it becomes possible to relax some of the stricter prohibitions of the past (such as taboos on showing skin for women or cursing in public) without producing a corresponding increase in violence. It is also conceivable that modern states will move increasingly toward greater decentralization and will outsource crime fighting and military activities to entities subject to the discipline of consumer sovereignty and profit-and-loss accounting. In his recent book *Just Warriors, Inc.: The Ethics of Privatized Force* (2011), philosopher and ethicist Deane-Peter Baker argues for the ongoing privatization of military force. Libertarian anarchist economists would take such arguments a step further and maintain that turning both law and law enforcement into private goods can improve their quality and

reduce the opportunities for abuse and “regulation” that come with a monopoly on the legitimate use of force.

The traditional argument for government is that it allows people to escape the state of nature. A different perspective is that the state arises from conquest and force, we never escape the state of nature, and that the peace that accrues to the state’s subjects is the kind that accrues to people who pay protection money. In a legendary passage, the nineteenth-century American individualist Lysander Spooner added an interesting perspective to the state/robber analogy by highlighting that states not only insist on protection money but use that money *against* the taxpayer in the form of regulation:

The highwayman takes solely upon himself the responsibility, danger, and crime of his own act. He does not pretend that he has any rightful claim to your money, or that he intends to use it for your own benefit. He does not pretend to be anything but a robber. He has not acquired impudence enough to profess to be merely a “protector,” and that he takes men’s money against their will, merely to enable him to “protect” those infatuated travelers, who feel perfectly able to protect themselves, or do not appreciate his peculiar system of protection. He is too sensible a man to make such professions as these. Furthermore, having taken your money, he leaves you, as you wish him to do. He does not persist in following you on the road, against your will; assuming to be your rightful “sovereign,” on account of the “protection” he affords you. He does not keep “protecting” you, by commanding you to bow down and serve him; by requiring you to do this, and forbidding you to do that; by robbing you of more money as often as he finds it for his interest or pleasure to do so; and by branding you as a rebel, a traitor, and an enemy to your country, and shooting you down without mercy, if you dispute his authority, or resist his demands. (1870, 6.3.5)

Contemporary states’ conduct may be exemplary compared to historical states’ barbaric pillaging and plundering, but the existence of democracy cannot eliminate the state’s intrinsic compulsory nature. In a sense, the socialization of force is one of the mixed blessings of democracy.

Ideology

One of the driving forces behind war, violence, and oppression is ideology. “To kill by the millions, you need an *ideology*,” writes Pinker. Like religion, ideologies can confer legitimacy on the most hideous forms of human depravity and provide a cover for its perpetrators. Thus, ideology can be called the “dark mirror image of reason.” It may foster utilitarian calculations that trade off the suffering of the few against

the greater (moral) good, and it may embrace unrealistic blueprints of human nature and society that require stringent conformism and obedience.

Pinker is not the first and will not be the last to draw attention to similarities between religion and certain ideologies. In *A History of Western Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell draws attention to similarities between Jewish/Christian eschatology and Marxist socialism:

Yahweh = Dialectical Materialism

The Messiah = Marx

The Elect = The Proletariat

The Church = The Communist Party

The Second Coming = The Revolution

Hell = Punishment of the Capitalists

The Millennium = The Communist Commonwealth ([1945] 1972, 364)

Experimental psychology and neuroscience have produced evidence that being an ideologue prevents dispassionate reasoning and proper evaluation of evidence. Our growing dislike of ideology shows itself when political partisans accuse their opponents of being rigid ideologues but claim that they themselves are only following the evidence and the dictates of reason. Pinker notes that the leadership of a nation is unfortunately likely to go to men who are excessively overconfident in their abilities. After all, no one has won a political election by praising the virtues of skepticism and alerting the voters to the possibility that his opponent might be right.

Pinker is not impressed by the argument that violence is produced by the absence of morality: “The world has far too much morality. If you added up all the homicides committed in pursuit of self-help justice, the casualties of religious and revolutionary wars, the people executed for victimless crimes and misdemeanors, and the targets of ideological genocides, they would surely outnumber the fatalities from amoral predation and conquest” (p. 622). This perspective conflicts with a persistent dogma that violence evinces a lack of morality (a prevalent view among modern libertarians such as Murray Rothbard and Ayn Rand). Instead, (Humean) skepticism and noncognitivism in ethics may well give rise to less moral absolutism and ideology and, as a result, to less violence and oppression.

Despite Pinker’s reasoned arguments against ideology, it is striking and somewhat surprising that he explicitly sympathizes with the political perspective he characterizes as “classical liberalism.” Evidence links intelligence to liberalism, and he writes that the General Social Survey, which tracks the characteristics of society in the United States, contains hints that “intelligence tracks classical liberalism more closely than left-liberalism” (p. 663). He even writes that “the momentum of social norms in the direction of Market Pricing gives many people the willies, but it would, for better or worse, extrapolate the trend toward nonviolence (p. 636). Without blinking, he says that our recent ancestors can be considered “morally retarded” in

view of the liberal humanism that all major political movements, including religious conservatives, now embrace in practice.

The Widening Circle and Individualism

Following the bioethicist Peter Singer, Pinker repeatedly draws attention to the fact that humans have progressively expanded the circle of people who deserve autonomy and protection from harm. He attributes this development to several factors, such as empathy guided by reason, but a combination of reason and increasing individualism may explain it as well. If one can rise higher in the social hierarchy by trading instead of fighting, peace becomes a rational individual disposition. Pushing people around and micromanaging their lives is likewise a costly activity that modern humans are less inclined to pursue unless the costs can be socialized—as they unfortunately are in modern democracies. Such an explanation can also incorporate the coexistence of seemingly conflicting phenomena, such as young people’s (perceived) political apathy and the increase of social liberalism.

Many of the lofty developments the author documents may simply reflect modern humans’ increasingly self-referential, calculating outlook. Empathy enables us to put ourselves in the shoes of other people—say, soldiers in combat—and therefore to try to keep people out of such shoes. As the case for capitalism can be moralized, the lofty ideals of the protest generation can be attributed to growing individualism, if not to a fair degree of self-centeredness. In such a narrative, the protesting generation that came of age in the 1960s, with its draft dodgers, sowed the seeds of the “me generation” in the 1980s. Pinker recognizes this possibility when he discusses the concept of autonomy as it pertains to the human body. Modern sensibilities do not allow *any* trade-offs between the interests of the individual and those of other parties, and the “socialistic” idea of treating the human body as a common resource is considered completely beyond the pale. Another interesting clue is the decline of homophobic violence, a type of violence that Pinker finds a great mystery because “there is nothing in it for the aggressor” (such as competition for women). We may easily imagine how the decline of homophobic practices has been further propelled by a more self-centered, calculating mindset that recognizes no personal gain in such activities.

That such an individualistic perspective cannot be the whole story is evident when Pinker presents interesting experimental evidence designed to distinguish egoistic motives and other-regarding motivates to reduce suffering. Other-regarding motives can give rise to selfless acts of sacrifice, provided a person sympathizes with the victim. Reading works of fiction and traveling can broaden the circle of people who elicit our sympathies. One of democracy’s virtues is that general elections select against politicians who lack empathy, whereas such leaders cannot be prevented in forms of government where authority is transferred by family lines.

Pinker, however, does not join the popular celebration of empathy, and he contrasts the use of reason (or empathy controlled by reason) favorably with uncritical

exercise of empathy. On the one hand, empathy allows us to change perspective and imagine what it would be like to be in another person's position. On the other hand, acting on empathy alone, especially when this mindset is joined with a preference for instant gratification, can subvert fairness and produce long-term adverse consequences (such as excessive dependence on welfare) and ugly identity politics. For Pinker, reason ultimately rules supreme in the decline of violence because "empathy, self-control, and the moral sense have too few degrees of freedom, and too restricted a range of application, to explain the advances of recent decades and centuries" (p. 668).

A respectable tradition in social thinking, associated mainly with classical liberalism, highlights the positive external effects of rational individuals' aiming for their own interest. Works such as David Gauthier's *Morals by Agreement* (1986) seek to demonstrate how self-interested individuals who seek mutual advantage will accept moral constraints on their conduct without succumbing to circular reasoning by starting from concepts such as "liberty," "rights," and "autonomy." Pinker expresses a similar outlook on morality when he notes that modern morality is "a consequence of the interchangeability of perspectives and the opportunity the world provides for positive-sum games" and that "assumptions of self-interest and sociality combine with reason to lay out a morality in which non-violence is the goal" (pp. 182, 647). This view is not the crude utilitarianism of the modern moral philosophers, but it calls to mind a contemporary perspective we now classify as "individualist" or "mutual advantage" contractarianism.

Concluding Thoughts

The Better Angels of Our Nature comprises two ambitious projects: to demonstrate the decline of violence and to explain this decline. Pinker is persuasive in the former project, but in the latter his book should be considered a masterful beginning rather than a successful completion. He devotes too little space to the possibility that the decline in violence is associated with ongoing natural selection. The book might also have benefitted from a more focused attempt to distinguish the peace dividend of commerce and the peace dividend of Leviathan. The most forceful critique of Pinker's framework relates to its exclusion of many modern government activities from its analysis of violence and crime.

In one sense, Pinker's book is a masterful debunking of the doom and gloom that inform the typical "progressive" intellectual. Dogmatic progressives will probably fault Pinker for his considerable support of law and order and his recognition of the beneficial effects of social institutions such as marriage on crime rates. On closer inspection, however, his multifaceted explanation of the decline in violence permits them to persist in downplaying the importance of incentives, deterrence, and policing. Progressives may continue to focus excessively on cultural factors that drive crime and violence. Although such a response would be incomplete and an invitation to increased crime, it might be consistent with a selective reading of the book.

What response might a cynical reader offer? One possibility would be to link Pinker's observations about the decline of violence to the burgeoning literature on happiness. The perception of crime and violence may resemble that of income disparities. The poor live much healthier, wealthier, and longer lives than the poor of centuries past, but advocates of income equality are no less angry than their predecessors. A common element of ideology and pessimism is that reality never bridges the gap between what is and what is conceivable. Political zealots will never take comfort from books such as *The Better Angels of Our Nature*.

One plausible rejoinder to Pinker's optimism is that the price of peace is increasing conformity. Pinker does not consider this trade-off, but his argument that cosmopolitan, enlightened people will arrive at identical conclusions about morals and social coexistence confirms some of the deepest suspicions held by critics of the Enlightenment. In his discussion of the humanitarian revolution, he makes an observation that may send shivers down the spine of every Enlightenment skeptic and romantic: "The universe of ideas, in which one idea entails others, is itself an exogenous force, and once a community of thinkers enters that universe, they will be forced in certain directions regardless of their material surroundings" (p. 180). Can such conformity remain confined to morals without extension to social organization and lifestyle? Such a fear may not be completely misplaced; all major political movements now draw on arguments against conformity in making their case: progressives fear the disappearance of local cultures as a result of global corporatism; conservatives object to central states' ongoing absorption of local political communities; and libertarians warn about the uniformity that regulation and tax harmonization impose. Such conformity is less likely if there is no "psychic unity of mankind," and the exercise of reason produces different perspectives that reflect human biodiversity. "Politically correct sensibilities may bridle at the suggestion that a group of people, like a variety of fruit, may have features in common, but if they didn't, there would be no cultural diversity to celebrate and no ethnic qualities to be proud of" (p. 323), writes Pinker.

One aspect of violence that continues to cause anxiety is that our "technical" capacity for inflicting pain and committing mass murder has only increased. A single *gigantic* world war or a series of massive murderous events can reverse the historical decline in violence. At this stage, most people would concur with Pinker that such a dire event is not likely to occur, but we are inclined to think so because we quite reasonably look for causes of such events in the past and conclude that their current absence ensures that such events will not occur again. As humanity continues to evolve, however, we will increasingly widen the gap between our abhorrence of inflicting pain and our capabilities to inflict it. Old myths and religions give us accounts of eternal torment, a scenario that might actually be brought within future humans' technical capabilities as rejuvenation and nanomedical technologies mature. These (theoretical) possibilities raise deep questions about how future societies should deal with violent and sadistic people.

Despite the current emphasis on cultural explanations of violence, Pinker's book provides robust evidence that humans' tendency toward violence might be modified by modifying humans themselves.

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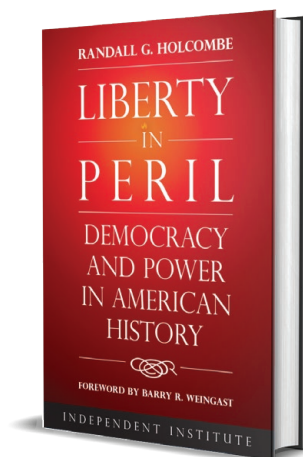
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