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The Better Angels Of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined



Synopsis

We've all had the experience of reading about a bloody war or shocking crime and asking, "What is the world coming to?" But we seldom ask, "How bad was the world in the past?" In this startling new book, the best-selling cognitive scientist Steven Pinker shows that the world of the past was much worse. In fact, we may be living in the most peaceable era in our species' existence. Evidence of a bloody history has always been around us: the genocides in the Old Testament and crucifixions in the New; the gory mutilations in Shakespeare and Grimm; the British monarchs who beheaded their relatives and the American founders who dueled with their rivals; the nonchalant treatment in popular culture of wife-beating, child abuse, and the extermination of native peoples. Now the decline in these brutal practices can be quantified. With the help of more than a hundred graphs and maps, Pinker presents some astonishing numbers. Tribal warfare was nine times as deadly as war and genocide in the 20th century. The murder rate in medieval Europe was more than thirty times what it is today. Slavery, sadistic punishments, and frivolous executions were unexceptionable features of life for millennia, then suddenly were targeted for abolition. Wars between developed countries have vanished, and even in the developing world, wars kill a fraction of the numbers they did a few decades ago. Rape, battering, hate crimes, deadly riots, child abuse, cruelty to animals - all substantially down. How could this have happened, if human nature has not changed? What led people to stop sacrificing children, stabbing each other at the dinner table, or burning cats and disemboweling criminals as forms of popular entertainment? Was it reading novels, cultivating table manners, fearing the police, or turning their energies to making money? Should the nuclear bomb get the Nobel Peace Prize for preventing World War III? Does rock and roll deserve the blame for the doubling of violence in the 1960s - and abortion deserve credit for the reversal in the 1990s? Not exactly, Pinker argues. The key to explaining the decline of violence is to understand the inner demons that incline us toward violence (such as revenge, sadism, and tribalism) and the better angels that steer us away. Thanks to the spread of government, literacy, trade, and cosmopolitanism, we increasingly control our impulses, empathize with others, bargain rather than plunder, debunk toxic ideologies, and deploy our powers of reason to reduce the temptations of violence. With the panache and intellectual zeal that have made his earlier books international best sellers and literary classics, Pinker will force you to rethink your deepest beliefs about progress, modernity, and human nature. This gripping book is sure to be among the most debated of the century so far.

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Customer Reviews

This is a huge book, but as Pinker says, it is a huge subject. He organizes himself by lists. First, there are six significant trends which have led to a decrease in violence.1. Our evolution from hunter gatherers into settled civilizations, which he calls the Pacification Process.2. The consolidation of small kingdoms and duchies into large kingdoms with centralized authority and commerce, which he calls the Civilizing Process.3. The emergence of Enlightenment philosophy, and it's respect for the individual through what he calls the Humanitarian Revolution.4. Since World War II, violence has been suppressed, first by the overwhelming force of the two parties in the Cold War, and more recently by the American hegemony. Pinker calls this the Long Peace.5. The general trend, even apart from the Cold War, of wars to be more infrequent, and less violent, however autocratic and anti-democratic the governments may be. Call this the New Peace.6. Lastly, the growth of peace and domestic societies, and with it the diminishing level of violence through small things like schoolyard fights, bullying, and picking on gays and minorities. He titles this the Rights Revolution. Pinker then goes on to examine the traditional explanations of violence, the traditional explanations of human nature which account for violence. There is practical violence, which you might call necessary violence. Then there are dominance, revenge, sadism, and ideologically driven violence. Opposing these are what he calls the better angels of human nature, empathy, self-control, our moral sense, and reason. Many of these characteristics are shared with our primate brethren, the chimpanzees on down, but some of them are uniquely human. With our ability to reason, and the unique human ability to impute motive to conspecifics of our own or other tribes, and our ability to express ourselves verbally, we are better able than any other species to negotiate

our way through situations of conflict. A good deal of the decline in violence has to do with the maturation of these processes through the genetic evolution of the human animal, and more recently, through the evolution of our society and the ways in which societies socialize their members. He concludes with five historical forces, which I find a little bit harder to grasp, but which serve as a vehicle for explanations of a number of interesting phenomena in the recent evolution of society. We have evolved Leviathan societies, in which the individual is pretty well controlled by state force. Not only our police, but our employers, our schools, and every other institution holds violence firmly in check as a matter of its own functioning. Other forces are commerce, which only happens when the partners are on peaceful terms, the evolution of women from mere propagators of the species to intellectual equals and partners in all of our undertakings, the growing information networks which bind us together, a process he calls cosmopolitanism, and lastly the increasing application of reason, which we would probably call the scientific basis, to human affairs, leading to a recognition that violence is in most circumstances not the best way to achieve one's ends. In his discussion of ideologically driven violence he spends several pages discussing ideologies themselves. Specifically, he describes the groupthink environment in which a group comes to embrace dogmas that most of the individuals within the group would reject, or at least question, if they approached them on their own. The key mechanism is punishment of dissention, the ostracism of people who don't mouth the groupthink. Sounds to me to describe political correctness at Harvard just as much as Communism under Stalin. I am pleased that Pinker had the courage to resist said PC and defend the science behind the observations which got Larry Summers fired as president of Harvard. Calls to mind the "Kinsley gaffe", "A truthful statement told accidentally, usually by a politician." For a guy with a long history of writing about evolution, he seems to pretty much avoid its implications in this book. In fact, he has more or less morphed from a true scientist to a social scientist/historian. Whereas "The Language Instinct" and "Words and Rules" got into leading edge science, and "The Blank Slate" brought us up to date on the theory of human evolution, this book is pretty much a compilation of other peoples' statistics and observations, weighted with Pinker's opinions. The question that will go through every reader's mind when reading a book on the subject this vast is "how do you know?" Pinker answers that question in a way that I really admire - statistics. He says that most of us reason from anecdotal evidence. For instance, because the news media play up terror deaths such as those in Fort Hood, they tend to be grossly exaggerated in our conscience. We would tend to equate the danger of death by an act of terror with that of dying from a lightning strike or industrial accident, when the latter are far more probable. Also, because there have been terror acts in the news lately, we would overlook the fact that the number of deaths

attributable to terror have fallen off dramatically over the past few decades. Pinker does a good job of educating us by taking on our common sense understandings, showing that they are erroneous, and showing us a statistical methodology by which we can realistically estimate broad societal phenomena such as terror, death by war, murder and so on. More than in his other books, Pinker reminds us of his Jewish roots, gently chafing Christianity for celebrating the sacrifice of an innocent man, and turning the cross, the instrument of sacrifice, into its holy icon. He also takes the obligatory swipes at George W. Bush for his bloodthirsty wars, conveniently overlooking the neocons like Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle who provided the intellectual foundation for the adventure. He also conveniently over looks the fact that President Obama, despite his vehement campaign rhetoric to the contrary, has continued the wars, presumably also with strong backing from AIPAC, and that he has likewise been captive to advisors such as Larry Summers. His writing is such a thrill to read that I overlook these tropes with a grin. And I appreciate that he is willing to defend the "dead white men" of the Enlightenment and make politically incorrect observations about the different peoples who make up America. I note, although Pinker does not address them in great detail, some concomitant trends. At the same time violence is decreasing, our religiosity, fertility and our tribalism are likewise decreasing. We are not fighting wars in the interests of religion because large swaths of humanity no longer believe. We are not fighting for lebensraum because we are not having the children that would be needed in order to populate more territory. In other words, at the same time we're becoming less violent, we're losing some of that zest for evolutionary success which led us to become violent in the first place. We can pray along with Doctor Pinker for a world in which there is increasingly less violence, but we need also pray for one in which the drive for human excellence continues to manifest itself. Afterward: For an excellent review by a professional historian, albeit somewhat more critical than this review, I recommend you google "timothy snyder war no more". Snyder is the author of "Bloodlands," which I also review favorably here on .

This very ambitious and sprawling book is a serious effort to argue for and explain the progressive decline in interpersonal violence in human societies. The book is divided into 2 parts. The first part is an effort to describe a broad sweep of human history from prehistoric societies to the present, arguing for a progressive though intermittent decline in violence in human societies. The second part is an effort to understand the underpinnings of the decline in violence in terms of human psychological processes. Pinker's sequence of the decline in violence is based on synthesis of a large volume of literature generated by archaeologists, ethnologists, historians, sociologists, political

scientists, and psychologists. Pre-state societies, while low in absolute population and absolute number of violent acts, had very high per capita levels of violence. The emergence of states resulted in some decline in violence and the gradual strengthening of the state resulted in a progressive decline in interpersonal violence, even as states became more capable of waging war. This is best documented in Europe from the Middle Ages to the present. Pinker highlights a number of important parallel processes. The "Civilizing Process" described by the great historical sociologist Norbert Elias of the increasing importance of self-control, manners, and social amity from the Renaissance onwards is prominently featured as a key feature in the decline of violence. Similarly, Pinker emphasizes the humanitarianism of the Enlightenment and subsequent reform movements. In the 20th century, the "Rights Revolution" that has brought widespread acceptance of religious and ethnic minorities, women, and homosexuals, is also discussed as improving our societies. Pinker makes the important point that while the 20th century saw great violence with the tremendous crimes committed by totalitarian states and the huge casualties of WWI and WWII, on a per capita basis, there is continued decline which has accelerated in the post-WWII era. All of these phenomena are generally well known to historians and many social scientists. Pinker deserves considerable credit for bringing them before the broad reading public and for synthesizing them into one broad arc. That said, Pinker's presentation and discussion of these topics is uneven. In general, Pinker does better when drawing on political science and other social science literature. His discussion of the democratic peace phenomenon, for example, is quite good. His discussions of historical topics often leads a good deal to be desired. Treating the admirable Barbara Tuchman as an authoritative source on late Medieval Europe when there is a lot of excellent secondary literature seems a bit lazy. Referring to Napoleonic France as the first fascist state is very misleading about both France in this period and 20th century fascism. I share Pinker's enthusiasm for Enlightenment reformism but his schematic version of the Enlightenment is a distortion of this rich historical phenomenon. Pinker also overlooks an important complication of his primary story. All of his discussion of the decline in violence from the Middle Ages onward, the Civilizing Process, Enlightenment Humanitarianism, etc., is based on European examples. But this is the same period during which European expansion results in the victimization of the pitiful remnant of the native peoples of the Western Hemisphere, Australia, and the Pacific. It is also largely the period of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which probably caused a marked increase in violence in sub-Saharan Africa. These phenomena were accompanied and followed by considerable imperialist-colonial depredations, some of which had marked destabilizing effects. One of the most traumatic events of the 19th century was the Taiping Rebellion, which caused tens of millions of deaths in China. The

Taiping revolt was partly a result of the destabilization of the Qing regime by European colonialism. None of this means that Pinker is wrong about the overall story but its a much more complicated evolution than he suggests. In the final part of the book, Pinker discusses the possible mechanisms of the decline in violence. This is largely a discussion of possibly relevant psychological processes. Pinker discusses psychological processes that would favor violence and other processes that would reduce violence. As with the descriptive part of the book, this is an effort to synthesize a lot of prior literature, notably social psychology literature. Pinker develops an interesting model in which some psychological mechanisms could interact in virtuous circles to enhance personal restraint, sympathy with others, and improve sociability. This is somewhat speculative but plausible. In one case, Pinker offers an interesting specific hypothesis that the decline in violence and increase in social tolerance we've experienced in the past decades is due to the Flynn effect, an apparent increase in certain aspects of intelligence across the 20th century. Also as with the first section of the book, these discussions are uneven. Pinker does better when discussing social psychology literature. As someone who is involved in neurobiology research, I found his efforts at including brain mechanisms overly simple. Given his reliance on social psychology studies for many of his most important analyses, the gestures at neurobiology add little to his overall presentation. Another deficiency of this book is Pinker's style of argumentation. On a paragraph by paragraph basis, Pinker is a clear and often engaging writer. Some sections could be confusing because of a tendency to abruptly reverse directions. In a section on the decline in crime in recent decades, he expands at some length on the effects of increased incarceration rates. He then abruptly changes course and attacks this idea. Without careful reading, it would be possible to take very different conclusions away from this discussion. Similarly, he has a discussion of so-called power law relationships in which he suggests the presence of apparent power law curves suggests a uniform process. He later suggests that dual processes could underly a power law curve and, in fact, the existence of a an apparent power law curve tell you nothing about whether a single or multiple processes underlies the phenomenon under study. Pinker also has a tendency to punctuate his analyses with opinionated asides that may or may not be relevant or valid. The purportedly destructive effects of the 1960s counterculture seems to be a idee fixe. This book would have benefited from a major revision prior to publication, some shortening, and a lot more historical research.

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