Delusions of peace

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Stephen Pinker argues that we are becoming less violent. Nonsense, says John Gray

"Today we take it for granted that war happens in smaller, poorer and more backward countries," Steven Pinker writes in his new book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: the Decline of Violence in History and Its Causes*. The celebrated Harvard professor of psychology is discussing what he calls "the Long Peace": the period since the end of the second world war in which "the great powers, and developed states in general, have stopped waging war on one another." As a result of "this blessed state of affairs," he notes, "two entire categories of war—the imperial war to acquire colonies, and the colonial war to keep them—no longer exist." Now and then there have been minor conflicts. "To be sure, [the super-powers] occasionally fought each other's smaller allies and stoked proxy wars among their client states." But these episodes do not diminish Pinker's enthusiasm about the Long Peace. Chronic warfare is only to be expected in backward parts of the world. "Tribal, civil, private, slave-raiding, imperial, and colonial wars have inflamed the territories of the developing world for millennia." In more civilised zones, war has all but disappeared. There is nothing inevitable in the process; major wars could break out again, even among the great powers. But the change in human affairs that has occurred is fundamental. "An underlying shift that supports predictions about the future," the Long Peace points to a world in which violence is in steady decline.

A sceptical reader might wonder whether the outbreak of peace in developed countries and endemic conflict in less fortunate lands might not be somehow connected. Was the immense violence that ravaged southeast Asia after 1945 a result of immemorial backwardness in the region? Or was a subtle and refined civilisation wrecked by world war and the aftermath of decades of neo-colonial conflict—as Norman Lewis intimated would happen in his prophetic account of his travels in the region, *A Dragon Apparent* (1951)? It is true that the second world war was followed by over 40 years of peace in North America and Europe—even if for the eastern half of the continent it was a peace that rested on Soviet conquest. But there was no peace between the powers that had emerged as rivals from the global conflict.

In much the same way that rich societies exported their pollution to developing countries, the societies of the highly-developed world exported their conflicts. They were at war with one another the entire time—not only in Indo-China but in other parts of Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. The Korean war, the Chinese invasion of Tibet, British counter-insurgency warfare in Malaya and Kenya, the abortive Franco-British invasion of Suez, the Angolan civil war, decades of civil war in the Congo and Guatemala, the Six Day War, the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 and of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the Iran-Iraq war and the Soviet-Afghan war—these are only some of the armed conflicts through which the great powers pursued their rivalries while avoiding direct war with each other. When the end of the Cold War removed the Soviet Union from the scene, war did not end. It continued in the first Gulf war, the Balkan wars, Chechnya, the Iraq war and in Afghanistan and Kashmir, among other conflicts. Taken together these conflicts add up to a formidable sum of violence. For Pinker they are minor, peripheral and hardly worth mentioning. The real story, for him, is the outbreak of peace in advanced societies, a shift that augurs an unprecedented transformation in human affairs.

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While Pinker makes a great show of relying on evidence—the 700-odd pages of this bulky treatise are stuffed with impressive-looking graphs and statistics—his argument that violence is on the way out does not, in the end, rest on scientific investigation. He cites numerous reasons for the change, including increasing wealth and the spread of democracy. For him, none is as important as the adoption of a particular view of the world: "The reason so many violent institutions succumbed within so short a

span of time was that the arguments that slew them belong to a coherent philosophy that emerged during the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment. The ideas of thinkers like Hobbes, Spinoza, Descartes, Locke, David Hume, Mary Astell, Kant, Beccaria, Smith, Mary Wollstonecraft, Madison, Jefferson, Hamilton and John Stuart Mill coalesced into a worldview that we can call *Enlightenment humanism*." (The italics are Pinker's.)

Yet these are highly disparate thinkers, and it is far from clear that any coherent philosophy could have "coalesced" from their often incompatible ideas. The difficulty would be magnified if Pinker included Marx, Bakunin and Lenin, who undeniably belong within the extended family of intellectual movements that comprised the Enlightenment, but are left off the list. Like other latter-day partisans of "Enlightenment values," Pinker prefers to ignore the fact that many Enlightenment thinkers have been doctrinally anti-liberal, while quite a few have favoured the large-scale use of political violence, from the Jacobins who insisted on the necessity of terror during the French revolution, to Engels who welcomed a world war in which the Slavs—"aborigines in the heart of Europe"—would be wiped out.

The idea that a new world can be constructed through the rational application of force is peculiarly modern, animating ideas of revolutionary war and pedagogic terror that feature in an influential tradition of radical Enlightenment thinking. Downplaying this tradition is extremely important for Pinker. Along with liberal humanists everywhere, he regards the core of the Enlightenment as a commitment to rationality. The fact that prominent Enlightenment figures have favoured violence as an instrument of social transformation is—to put it mildly—inconvenient.

There is a deeper difficulty. Like so many contemporary evangelists for humanism, Pinker takes for granted that science endorses an Enlightenment account of human reason. Since science is a human creation, how could humans not be rational? Surely science and humanism are one and the same. Actually it's extremely curious—though entirely typical of current thinking—that science should be linked with humanism in this way. A method of inquiry rather than a settled view of the world, there can be no guarantee that science will vindicate Enlightenment ideals of human rationality. Science could just as well end up showing them to be unrealisable.

Admittedly, this was not a conflict that faced any of the thinkers Pinker cites. None of them based their view of the human animal on the findings of science. *The Origin of Species* appeared in the same year as John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (1859), but the most influential liberal humanist (who died in 1873) never mentioned Darwin in his seminal works. Although Mill wrote extensively on the need for "moral science," his view of human beings was a mix of classical philosophy (especially Aristotle) and the ideas of personal development he imbibed from the Romantics. Mill never considered the possibility that his view of human beings could be falsified by scientific investigation. Still, one must not judge him too harshly. He did not have to consider whether his view of humankind squared with science because the science of evolution was only just coming into being.

Pinker and his fellow humanists have no such excuse today. Evolutionary psychology is in its infancy, and much of what passes for knowledge in the subject is not much more than speculation—or worse. There have been countless attempts to apply evolutionary theory to social life but, since there is no mechanism in society comparable to natural selection in biology, they have produced only a succession of misleading metaphors, in which social systems are mistakenly viewed as living organisms. Indeed, if there is anything of substance to be derived from an evolutionary view of the human mind, it must be the persistence of unreason.

As the related discipline of behavioural finance has shown in some detail with regard to decision-making under conditions of risk and uncertainty, human thought and perception are riddled with bias, inconsistency and self-deception. Since our minds are animal minds—as Darwin argued in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872)—things could hardly be otherwise. Shaped by imperatives of survival, the human mind will not normally function as an organ for seeking out the truth. If science is the pursuit of truth—an assumption that begs some tricky questions—it doesn't follow that anything similar is possible in other areas of human life. The idea that humans can shape their lives by the use of reason is an inheritance from rationalist philosophy that does not fit easily with what we know of the evolution of our mammalian brain. The end result of scientific inquiry may well be that irrational beliefs are humanly indispensable.

Science and humanism are at odds more often than they are at one. For a devoted Darwinist like Pinker to maintain that the world is being pacified by the spread of a particular world view is deeply ironic. There is nothing in Darwinism to suggest that ideas and beliefs can transform human life. To be sure, there have been attempts to formulate an idea of progress in terms of competing memes—vaguely defined concepts or units of meaning that are held to be in some ways akin to genes—although nothing like a scientific theory has been developed. Even if there were such things as memes and they did somehow compete with one another, there is nothing to say that benign memes would be the winners. Quite to the contrary, if history is any guide. Racist ideas are extremely resilient and highly contagious, as is shown by the re-emergence of xenophobic ethnic nationalism and antisemitism in post-communist Europe. So are utopian ideas, which have resurfaced in neoconservative thinking about regime change. The recurrent appearance of these memes suggests that outside of some fairly narrowly defined areas of scientific investigation, progress is at best fitful and elusive. Science may be the cumulative elimination of error, but the human fondness for toxic ideas is remarkably constant.

The irony is compounded when we recall that Pinker achieved notoriety through his attempt to reinstate the idea that the human mind is fixed and limited. His bestseller *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (2002), an assault on the idea that human behaviour is indefinitely malleable, was controversial for several reasons—not least for its attack on the belief that pre-agricultural cultures were inherently peaceable. The book provoked a storm of criticism from liberal humanists who sensed—rightly—that this emphasis on the constancy of human nature limited the scope of future human advance. Pinker seems to have come to share this anxiety, and the present volume is the result. The decline of violence posited in *The Better Angels of Our Nature* is a progressive transformation of precisely the kind his earlier book seemed to preclude. But the contradiction in which Pinker is stuck is not his alone. It afflicts anyone who tries to combine rigorous Darwinism with a belief in moral progress. Darwinism is unlikely to be the last word on evolution and, rather than identifying universal laws of natural selection, it may only apply in our corner of the universe. But if Darwin's theory is even approximately right, there can be no rational basis for expecting any revolution in human behaviour.

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This is a troubling truth for humanists, including Pinker. It can be avoided only by pointing to some kind of ongoing evolution in humans, and Pinker is now ready to entertain "the possibility that in recent history *Homo Sapiens* has literally evolved to become less violent in the biologist's technical sense of a change in our genome." He concludes that there is very little evidence that this is so, but the fact that he takes the possibility seriously is telling. Social violence is coeval with the human species. This is not because humans have always been driven by an inbuilt instinct of aggression. Some of the impulses we inherit from our evolutionary past may incline us to conflict, but others— "the better angels of our nature," as Abraham Lincoln called them—incline us to peaceful cooperation. In order to show that conflicts between the two will in future increasingly be settled in favour of peace, Pinker needs to be able to identify some very powerful trends. He does his best, but the changes to which he points—the spread of democracy and the increase of wealth, for example—are more problematic than he realises. The formation of democratic nation-states was one of the principal drivers of violence of the last century, involving ethnic cleansing in inter-war Europe, post-colonial states and the post-communist Balkans. Steadily-growing prosperity may act as a kind of tranquilliser, but there is no reason to think the increase of wealth can go on indefinitely—and when it falters violence will surely return. In quite different ways, attacks on minorities and immigrants by neo-fascists in Europe, the popular demonstrations against austerity in Greece and the English riots of the past summer show the disruptive and dangerous impact of sudden economic slowdown on social peace. All the trends that supposedly lie behind the Long Peace are contingent and reversible.

Hobbes is cited more than once by Pinker, but he misses Hobbes's most important insight: that even if humans were not moved by the pursuit of power and glory, scarcity and uncertainty would drive them repeatedly into conflict with one another. Recurrent violence is a result of the normal disorder of human life. In some ways Hobbes—an early Enlightenment thinker and an intrepid rationalist—was overly sanguine about the capacity of humans to lift themselves out of conflict. Envisioning a social contract in which the power of violence is handed over to a peace-making state, he failed to take account of the fact that humans adapt to violence and often turn it into a way of life. (The novelist Cormac McCarthy presents an image of such a way of life in *Blood Meridian,* his fictional recreation

of the mid-19th century American-Mexican borderlands.) When it is not a way of life, violence is often simply a method. Suicide bombing is morally repugnant but it is also cheap and highly effective, deploying an abundant and easily replaceable resource—human life—to achieve objectives that could be compromised if the perpetrators survived to be captured and interrogated. Humans use violence for many reasons, and everything points to their doing so for the foreseeable future.

No doubt we have become less violent in some ways. But it is easy for liberal humanists to pass over the respects in which civilisation has retreated. Pinker is no exception. Just as he writes off mass killing in developing countries as evidence of backwardness without enquiring whether it might be linked in some way to peace in the developed world, he celebrates "recivilisation" in America without much concern for those who pay the price of the recivilising process. Focusing on large, ill-defined cultural changes—a decline of the values of respectability and self-control in the 1960s, for example, which he tells us resulted from the influence of "the counterculture"—his analysis has a tabloid flavour, not improved by his repeated recourse to not always very illuminating statistics.

One set of numbers does stand out, however. "By the early 1990s Americans had gotten sick of the muggers, vandals and drive-by shootings." The result is clear: "Today more than two million Americans are in jail, the highest incarceration rate on the planet. This works out to three-quarters of a percent of *the entire population* and a much larger percentage of young men, especially African Americans." (Again the italics are Pinker's.) The astonishing numbers of black young men in jail in the US is due to the disproportionate impact on black people of the "decivilising process," notably the high rate of black children born out of wedlock and what Pinker sees as the resulting potential for violence in families (black or white) that lack the civilising influence of women. While "massive imprisonment" has not reversed this trend, it "removes the most crime-prone individuals from the streets, incapacitating them." America's experiment in mass incarceration is, apparently, an integral part of the recivilising process.

The vast growth of the American penal state, reaching a size not achieved in any other country, does not immediately present itself as an advance in civilisation. A large part of the rise in the prison population has to do with America's repressive policies on drugs, which Pinker endorses when he observes: "A regime that trawls for drug users or other petty delinquents will net a certain number of violent people as a by-catch, further thinning the ranks of the violent people who remain on the streets." While it may be counter-productive in regard to its stated goal of controlling drugs use, it seems America's prohibitionist regime offers a useful means of banging up troublesome people. The possibility that mass incarceration of young males may be in some way linked with family breakdown is not considered. Highly uneven access to education, disappearing low-skill jobs, cuts in welfare and greatly increased economic inequality are also disregarded, even though these factors go a long way in explaining why there are so many poor blacks and so few affluent whites in prison in America today.

Talking to the vacuum cleaner salesman and part-time British agent James Wormold in Graham Greene's O*ur Man in Havana*, the Cuban secret policeman Captain Segura refers to "the torturable class": those, chiefly the poor, who expect to be tortured and who (according to Segura) accept the fact. The poor in America may not fall exactly into this category—even if some of the practices to which they are subject in US prisons are not far from torture. But there is certainly an imprisonable class in the United States, largely composed of people that Pinker describes as decivilised, and once they have been defined in this way there is a kind of logic in consigning this category of human beings to the custody of America's barbaric justice system.

Pinker's attempt to ground the hope of peace in science is profoundly instructive, for it testifies to our enduring need for faith. We don't need science to tell us that humans are violent animals. History and contemporary experience provide more than sufficient evidence. For liberal humanists, the role of science is, in effect, to explain away this evidence. They look to science to show that, over the long run, violence will decline—hence the panoply of statistics and graphs and the resolute avoidance of inconvenient facts. The result is no more credible than the efforts of Marxists to show the scientific necessity of socialism, or free-market economists to demonstrate the permanence of what was until quite recently hailed as the Long Boom. The Long Peace is another such delusion, and just as ephemeral.