

If I ruled the world: Steven Pinker

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We should stop idealising the past and appreciate the present. The world is much less violent than it used to be.

This decree would, first of all, eliminate tedious jeremiads about the decline of the language. The genre has been around for centuries, and if the doomsayers were correct we would now be grunting like Tarzan. But not only do we see vast amounts of clear and competent prose in everyday outlets like Wikipedia and Amazon reviews, but a gusher of superb writing appearing daily, as anyone who has lost a morning to sites like The Browser and Arts and Letters Daily can attest.

Language mavens commonly confuse their own peeves with a worsening of the language. A century ago editors issued fatwas against barbarous innovations such as “standpoint,” “bogus,” “to run a business,” and “to quit smoking.” Decades ago they fulminated against “six people” (as opposed to persons), “fix” (for repair), and the verbs “to contact” and “to finalise.” Today this linguistic contraband is unexceptionable, if not indispensable. Also vilified is the seepage of new technological jargon into the language (leverage, incentivise, synergy). Yet old technological jargon (proportional, placebo, false positive, trade-off) has made it easier for everyone to think about abstract concepts, and may even have contributed to the Flynn effect, the relentless increase in IQ scores during the 20th century.

And speaking of technology, today’s Luddites have a short memory. Parents who lament the iPods and mobile phones soldered onto the ears of teenagers forget that their own parents made the same complaint about them and their bedroom telephones and transistor radios. The abbreviated prose in tweets and instant messages is no more likely to corrupt the language or shorten attention spans than the telegrams, radio ads, and advertising catchphrases of yesteryear. Email can seem like a curse, but who would go back to stamps, phone booths, carbon paper, and piles of phone messages? And now that dinner companions can fact-check any assertion on an iPhone, we are coming to realise how many of our everyday beliefs are false—a valuable lesson in the fallibility of memory.

But nowhere is the confusion of a data point with a trend more pernicious than in our understanding of violence. A terrorist bomb explodes, a sniper runs amok, an errant drone kills an innocent, and commentators ask “What is the world coming to?” Yet they seldom ask, “How bad was the world in the past?”

By just about any quantitative standard, the world of the past was much worse. The medieval rate of homicide was 35 times the rate of today, and the rate of death in tribal warfare 15 times higher than that. Collapsed empires, horse-tribe invasions, the Crusades, the slave trade, the wars of religion, and the colonisation of the Americas had death tolls which, adjusted for population, rival or exceed those of the world wars. In earlier centuries the wife of an adulterer could have her nose cut off, a seven-year-old could be hanged for stealing a petticoat, a witch could be sawn in half, and a sailor could be flogged to a pulp. Deadly riots were common enough in 18th-century England to have given us the expression “to read the riot act,” and in 19th-century Russia to have given us the word pogrom. Deaths in warfare have come lurchingly but dramatically downward since their postwar peak in 1950. Deaths from terrorism are less common in today’s “age of terror” than they were in the 1960s and 1970s, with their regular bombings, hijackings, and shootings by various armies, leagues, coalitions, brigades, factions and fronts.

And no, I am not hypocritically tilting at my own “disturbing new trend.” In 1777 David Hume wrote, “The humour of blaming the present, and admiring the past, is strongly rooted in human nature.” A century before him, Thomas Hobbes identified its source: “Competition of praise inclineth to a reverence of antiquity. For men contend with the living, not with the dead.” People also blame the present out of historical ignorance and statistical illiteracy, and because they mistake changes in themselves—the responsibilities of adulthood, the vigilance of parenthood, the diminishment of ageing—with changes in the world.

Regardless of its causes, thoughtlessly blaming the present is a weakness which, even if it is never outlawed, ought to be resisted. Though commonly flaunted as a sign of sophistication, it can be an opportunity for one-upmanship and an excuse for misanthropy, especially against the young. And it corrodes an appreciation of the institutions of modernity such as democracy, science, and cosmopolitanism which have made our lives so much richer and safer.

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