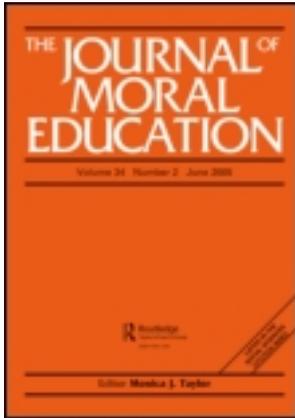


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The better angels of our nature: why violence has declined

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The better angels of our nature: why violence has declined

Steven Pinker, 2011

New York, Viking

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This thick tome argues that humanity has enjoyed a global decline of violence in every sense: over centuries and millennia, in every corner of the globe, and with respect to all kinds of physical violence from war, to genocide, to torture and cruel punishment, to slavery, bloody vendetta and even in the treatment of animals. It is an audacious thesis and deliberately so. With it, Pinker seems intent on settling a few accounts. The book replies to criticisms of his earlier work, *The blank slate* (2002), which took to task the cherished liberal ideas that human behaviour is mostly malleable and that modern, ‘civilized’ people are the real savages, not humans living in traditional hunter-gather societies. Pinker’s assertions in *The blank slate* about the relatively low levels of violence in traditional societies some of his critics’ claimed, could not stand up against the anthropological evidence. In reply to this charge, *Better angels* painstakingly documents a vast array of evidence showing that pre-modernity was indeed more violent than modernity and significantly so. Pinker’s second concern is to counter what he considers to be a pervasive innumeracy in contemporary journalistic and intellectual culture which lulls people into a false sense of insecurity. Unless we are vigilant about keeping an eye on the numbers, Pinker suggests, the journalistic principle ‘if it bleeds, it leads’ can easily create the wrong impression that we are living in exceptionally violent times.

Pinker’s attempt to marshal the numbers to debunk the myth of the noble savage is on the whole less convincing than his statistical challenge to the ‘lugubrious conventional wisdom’ (p. 671) about rates of violence in modern societies.

The case against the myth of the noble savage, presented in the second chapter, draws mainly on two data sets: rates and percentages of death in war in non-state versus state societies and homicide rates in non-state societies versus state societies.

The first figures, though highly suggestive, seem inconclusive. Although the statistical chance of dying a violent death during the bloody twentieth century (about 3%) pales in comparison with the percentage of war deaths in hunter-gatherer societies at the top end of the scale (20% or more), the least warlike non-state societies compare quite favourably to state societies. Pinker’s consistent portrayal of the wars and genocides of the twentieth century throughout this book as an

anomalous spike in a clear downward trend explains why he downplays this result. But this interpretative move smacks of cherry picking. To assess how violent a society is what matters is how much violence there is in that society. Whether or not certain violent episodes are ‘typical’ of that society is rather beside the point.

The second data set is badly tainted by the fact that all the information on homicide rates in non-state societies comes from modern hunter-gatherer groups long in contact with more technologically advanced, socially complex, imperialist state societies. There is just not enough detail in Pinker’s analysis to tell whether the high rates of intra-communal violence that he takes as typical of non-state societies do not instead reflect the social upheaval that is typical of the colonial contact, period. With this in mind, Pinker’s remark that that ‘imperial conquest and rule can themselves be brutal, they do reduce endemic violence among the conquered’ (pp. 55–56) seems indecorous even if it were true.

The main goal of the following five chapters is to document the gradual decline of violence in North Atlantic societies from the Middle Ages to the present and this notwithstanding two world wars, the holocaust, the crushing dictatorships of Russia and Cambodia, the Armenian and Rwandan genocides, etc. The basic claim becomes far more intuitively plausible when one bears in mind that Pinker is concerned with *relative* rates of violence not absolute ones. What he wants us to ask is, ‘if I were one of the people who were alive in a particular era, what would be the chances that I would be a victim of violence?’ (p. 47). The table listing ‘(Possibly) The Twenty (or so) Worst Things People Have Done to Each Other’ (p. 195) illustrates the approach lucidly. The Second World War, having caused the deaths of an estimated 55 million people, was the most violent conflict in human history in absolute terms. However, adjusted to the number of people alive at the time, it ranks eighth, behind the little-known Lushan Rebellion in northern China in the eighth century (first) and the annihilation of the American Indians (seventh).

The point is almost certainly valid and undoubtedly important but the whole approach seems too high-brow to have much meaning for the book’s primary audience of educated Americans. These readers, I expect, are exercised less by death tolls and homicide rates in distant times and places than by statistical trends in violence at home and in their own lifetimes. It comes as something of a surprise, then, that when Pinker deals with this issue, he takes declining US crime rates as entirely given. The section focuses, instead, on elaborating an explanation of the Great Crime Decline of the 1990s in terms of the ‘Leviathan theory’ (p. 42)—i.e., that strong and effective centralized states cause reductions in violence within their borders. The result is a bold-faced defence of the policy shift in the US towards ‘get-tough-on-crime’ measures like mandatory minimum sentences, raising incarceration rates and increasing the size and public visibility of police forces. In Pinker’s reading of the situation, what happened in the 1990s was that ‘Leviathan got bigger, smarter and more effective’ (p. 121).

The really big idea in this really big book, though, is its explanatory account of the widespread decline of violence around the world. The last chapter advances

that a set of social and psychological innovations operate as ‘pacifying forces’ which push against people’s violent motives. The social innovations are: the delegation of the use of legitimate force to strong, effective states, the expansion of trade networks and improving women’s social conditions. The psychological innovations are: enhanced capacities for perspective taking and the universalization of social reasoning. In a nutshell, Pinker’s reconciliation of the fixity of human nature with the apparent fact of human moral progress consists in using violence as a test case to illustrate that behaviour is a function of the *interaction* between human nature and the social environment.

The measure of this book’s success will be its ability to instil in readers a renewed sense of gratitude towards modernity and optimism about humanity’s future. Gratitude, because despite modernity’s many unprecedented challenges, it has at least managed to largely eradicate one social scourge. Optimism, because if we can understand what drove violence down we can make social choices that keep our inner demons in check and unleash our better angels.

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