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Histories of Violence

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In his new book Steven Pinker, psychologist at Harvard University, sets out to fundamentally alter our

understanding of the trajectory of violence from pre-historic times to the present. He takes issue with the widely held perception that the most recent past, the 20th century, was an age of large-scale bloodshed and genocidal slaughter. Quite to the contrary, Pinker argues, the decades since the end of the Cold War are best described as a 'new peace', as an era of historically unprecedented low levels of physical violence, a phenomenon which throughout the book is basically conceptualised as killing in its various forms, from homicide to genocidal warfare. For Pinker, this recent quantitative reduction in interpersonal violence is only the last step in a long historical decline of violence. In a *tour de force* through the ages, from prehistoric hunter-gatherers to the international history of the Cold War, Pinker charts the rate of killings through murder and warfare in per cent of the actual population, rather than the actual number of victims, in order to allow comparisons across the millennia and between societies with vastly different demographics. The vast amount of evidence marshalled and plotted in a large number of graphs only serves to drive home the key point: a number of historical factors and evolutionary advances have worked together to tame and control the human impulse for violence, and to usher in a world which has managed to reduce violence to such low levels that there is reason to take pride in the achievements of Western modernity.

Among the key factors and processes Pinker identifies as drivers of this fundamental change, a few are worth explaining in some detail. There is first the notion of a 'civilizing process', derived from the book with the same title by German sociologist Norbert Elias, first published in 1939. According to the questionable Freudian underpinnings of this argument, the spreading of new codes of civilised behaviour allowed individuals 'to keep their biological impulses 'in check' (p. 73), in a process that gathered momentum since the 16th century. As chains of interdependence within society expanded and prolonged, individuals learned to control themselves, a process which not only led to vastly improved table manners, but also to declining homicide rates across Europe. While Pinker's remarks about declining rates of homicide are corroborated by Robert Muchembled in his book *A History of Violence* (which should bear the title *A History of Homicide*, as it is about that and nothing else), Muchembled actually sees other historical factors at work. Based on decades of empirical work mostly on regional evidence from northern France in the early modern period, Muchembled puts the difficult situation of young males in rural and urban settings centre stage. Before they settled through marriage and the establishing of a family, small bands of young men roamed the streets of and between villages, regularly engaging in quarrels or duels which could quickly lead to fighting and ultimately murder. Only from the 17th century on, when the adult males in towns and villages found ways of 'fabricating' a docile youth' (p. 122) 'whatever that may have meant in practice' and managed to keep tabs on their violent impulses, did the homicide rate drop significantly. Muchembled's preference for the uncontrolled group dynamics of young males and their rites of passage to adulthood as the key explanatory factor, however, is not fully borne out even by his own evidence for the Artois, which he has studied in-depth. During the period from 1400 to 1660, 59 per cent of those in the Artois who stood in the dock for homicide were young men. This does suggest that this age cohort was significantly overrepresented. Nevertheless, 41 per cent of the defendants were married, and it is not entirely clear whether and to what extent adult perpetrators took part in the historical decline of homicide rates. Another weakness of Muchembled's account is its geographical limitation. Apart from France and England, only the Low Countries are covered in some detail. The Holy Roman Empire is virtually absent from Muchembled's map of Western Europe, as is Switzerland. Thus, the reader can only guess whether the process of confessionalization with its concomitant drive for a tightening of moral control (not only in the Calvinist practice of 'Sittenzucht') had had any impact on the long-term decline in murder rates in Western Europe.

Returning to Steven Pinker, the second key factor for the decline of violence he identifies is the 'humanitarian revolution' of the 17th and 18th centuries, that is, the Enlightenment culture with its focus on empathy and respect for human life, as exemplified in the abolition of witchcraft persecution, torture and cruel punishments. Pinker identifies one crucial 'exogenous' factor that was driving this change, the 18th-century reading revolution with increasing rates of literacy and mass circulation of books. The reading of novels, Pinker argues, allowed people to take on the perspective of other human beings and to develop insights into their plight and suffering, thus supporting attempts to abolish slavery and increasing awareness of the human cost of war. But if that were the case, why did one contemporary reviewer of Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), which features in Pinker's list of high-profile titles which allegedly

‘raised public awareness of the suffering of people’ in war (p. 177) and is usually considered to be the most successful anti-war book of the 20th century, describe the novel as ‘pacifist war propaganda’? What he meant was that Remarque described the war as an enticing adventure, rather than inviting readers to develop empathy with the victims of war. And as a matter of fact, Remarque reiterated many tropes which portrayed war as a positive and meaningful experience of adventure and male bonding, one reason why his book was almost compulsory reading among the Wehrmacht soldiers who trampled over Europe from September 1939. This is only one example of the ways in which Pinker presents an often mechanical, one-directional argument which is almost systematically devoid of historical context and, even more importantly, lacks a sense of the inherent ambivalence of historical processes and indeed of the very notion of ‘progress’ itself. The limitations of Pinker’s intellectual approach – and of his actual engagement with key texts on the history and theory of violence – are nowhere more obvious than in a footnote on p. 735, which informs the reader that among those incurable Lefties who are allegedly ‘blaming [!] the Enlightenment for the Holocaust’ are not only the usual suspects such as Michel Foucault or Zygmunt Bauman, but also Theodor W. Adorno. Reading this footnote made me wince, not only for the fact that Max Horkheimer, the co-author of the 1944 text on the *Dialectics of Enlightenment* is simply obliterated, but more so for the lack of curiosity on the side of Pinker in the argument the two emigré thinkers develop in the book.

The extended argument in chapter five, which charts the decreasing magnitude of wars throughout the 20th century apart from the two World Wars, also invites criticism. Pinker describes the post-war period as a ‘long peace’, thus employing the highly contested term first suggested by John Lewis Gaddis in 1986 as a pertinent label for the Cold War as a whole. Yet many historians of the Cold War tend to disagree with this label, and would certainly not be ready to dismiss nuclear deterrence as quickly as a factor for the non-occurrence of a major war between the two superpowers as Pinker is inclined to do, mainly relying on the rather dubious arguments brought forward by John Mueller (p. 268ff.). Equally unconvincing is Pinker’s decision to reformulate the notion of ‘democratic’ or ‘liberal’ peace rather quickly as ‘capitalist peace’. This argument is based on a set of correlations in a multiple-regression analysis of quantifiable indicators, a calculation which apparently identified ‘gentle commerce’ as a pacifying factor (p. 287).

To be fair, there is a lot more pertinent quantitative evidence presented in the first six chapters of Pinker’s book than can be reviewed here in a few paragraphs. Nevertheless, there are many reasons why Pinker’s book can at best be only a starting point for a much more thorough, nuanced and historically-informed investigation into the long-term decline of violence over the past five millennia. In its present form, the argument is rather shallow and unconvincing. The basic point, to be sure, remains valid. Calculated as the chance of an individual to die as a result of homicide, torture and capital punishment, war or genocide (throughout the book expressed as the number of cases among 100,000 people per year), a person in the world society of the early 21st century is much less likely to suffer a violent death than one of our ancestors in the tribal societies and agricultural settlements of the period around 10,000 BCE. To some extent, though, this finding is basically a statistical artefact, the result of the exponential growth in world population during the 20th century, against which percentages for earlier periods are calculated. Does this really mean that the present situation is aptly described as ‘peace’? Is the quantitative evidence sufficiently reliable to underpin the details and the general nature of Pinker’s argument, and sufficient as an historical explanation? And, last but not least: is his understanding of violence as a social phenomenon sufficient to corroborate this argument?

In my view, the answer to all three questions is ‘no’. I start with the evidence. Pinker plots the decline of violence in dozens of charts, thus suggesting that it is possible to make exact statements not only about the general trend, but also about its dimensions. Most of his argument on prehistoric non-state societies is taken from a book by Lawrence Keeley, published in 1996. Yet experts in pre-historic archaeology have noted that archaeological evidence – compared to data derived from ethnographic observation – suggests ‘much less violent’ societies, and indeed the absence of wars in the ancient Near East ‘until the late Neolithic’, and their rare occurrence in ancient China, Japan and in a number of other places.⁽¹⁾ Given the scattered nature of archaeological evidence, Pinker confronts the reader with graphs which suggest a level of accuracy which is simply unobtainable for pre-historic times (see p. 49). Similarly, the data for the decline in annual

homicide rates in Western Europe are much less-clear cut than Pinker suggests: 'from between 4 and 100 homicides' [!] per 100,000 people in the Middle Ages to about 0.8 in the 1950s (p. 62). Various factors, also not comprehensively discussed by Muchembled, undermine the only-at-first-glance suggestive accuracy of these figures: population statistics for the period before 1800 are rough estimates at best, and short-term fluctuations in the local population of one town or county 'from which all these calculations are derived' cannot be accounted for; most early modern homicide victims did not die immediately, while improvements in medical care have to be factored in well before the 20th century; access to stabbing weapons was a major factor for the propensity of lethal violence, and might indeed explain many of the differences between regions, countries and even more so between the USA and Europe.

Equally unconvincing, at least from the historian's point of view, is Pinker's reliance on Norbert Elias. There are many good reasons to reject Elias' utterly simplifying portrait of late medieval European societies, which is the necessary backdrop to his argument about the 'civilizing process'. From a conceptual perspective, Elias is also certainly not 'the only theory left standing' (p. 64). Max Weber and Niklas Luhmann are only two of the many sociologists which historians have put to good use to explain the transformation of state control and the pacification of early modern societies. Pinker reproduces two illustrations from the late 15th century 'Housebook' which Elias used in order to explain how late medieval knights indulged in relentless, brutal acts of savagery. Here as on other occasions, Pinker uses pictorial evidence in a highly naïve manner, suggesting that these images simply depict historical 'reality' (pp. 65f., 112). Far from it. Historians have shown in quite some detail that the use of primary evidence by Norbert Elias, and particularly his interpretation of the 'Housebook', was naïve and utterly misleading by the standards of historical knowledge already achieved by the 1930s, when he worked on his book. Rather than simply being a realistic depiction of actual violence, these images offered a highly normative reading of the contemporary situation.⁽²⁾

Yet it is not only the degree of accuracy Pinker suggests is achievable in the calculation of rates of violence across centuries and millennia that is problematic. Equally unconvincing is his insistence that large-scale incidents of violence can be compared across time without the need to account properly for their context and for the meanings historical actors attached to them. The mechanistic nature of his reasoning is best exemplified by a table which offers the estimated death toll of 20 major wars and atrocities across the ages, and their 'adjusted rank' in relation to the mid 20th century size of the global population (p. 195). For those who are unfamiliar with early modern history, the table can serve as a helpful reminder that the Thirty Years' War was 'in adjusted population figures' more lethal than both the Napoleonic Wars and the First World War, suggesting that it is wrong to calculate the destructive nature of the 'total wars' of the 20th century in terms of their absolute death toll alone.⁽³⁾ But is it historically apt and insightful to compare the deaths during the Mideast and Atlantic slave trades, which occurred from the 7th to the 19th and the 15th to 19th centuries respectively (and given third and eighth place in 'adjusted' rank) with the those from the First World War (number 16 in the adjusted ranking), when fatalities were mostly confined to Europe during the Great War, and between two and 21 per cent of all males in the age-cohort from 18 to 45 in most European countries were wiped out in slightly more than four years? There is no denying that quantitative evidence about violence, however tentative it might be for the period before 1800, can work as a starting point for a consideration of the decline of violence in history. But any such endeavour is bound to fail when it does not try to reconstruct the implicit rationality and the different levels of the organization and implementation of violence in the past. Practices of killing are usually connected to institutions which employ violence, and both the uses and the possible decline of violence cannot be explained without taking these institutional contexts into account. It is irritating to see that Pinker, whenever he is prompted to consider such contexts and causes of mass violence, falls for the most simplistic and superficial explanation that is on offer. Two examples must suffice to make this point: 'No Hitler, no Holocaust' (p. 209), and again Hitler alone 'mostly responsible' for the Second World War (p. 248).

In the final two chapters, the psychologist Pinker offers discipline-specific arguments about the psychological motives which can be used to explain the drive towards violence or the causes for peaceful orientations as the 'output of several psychological systems' (chapter XXV), urges such as the drive for

dominance, revenge, sadism or, perhaps surprisingly listed as a psychological faculty, ideology. Here, the reader is confronted with the results of various laboratory experiments, and with neurobiological insights into the specific parts of the brain which apparently enable or disable some of these motives. I am not a psychologist and hence not in a position to assess the accuracy of any of these explanations. It is, however, possible to establish why their explanatory value is rather limited: under any circumstances, violence is the result of a social relation, mainly between the perpetrator and the victim, but often including bystanders as a third party. It is possible and necessary to differentiate even further, and to distinguish between short-lived violent encounters, the specification of roles in organised violence such as in the military or organised crime, and the general level of violence in a given society.⁽⁴⁾ Yet in any of these configurations, violence is a 'fait social' in the original meaning of the term: it is something which cannot be explained as a result of the psychological motivations of the individuals involved, but is a result of the social dynamics of either fleeting encounters or formal organizations, while any original psychological motivations of the people involved often disappear or become largely irrelevant in the process of practicing violence.

Finally, a word on peace. Peace is indeed part and parcel of the 'project of modernity', to use the phrase coined by Jürgen Habermas. And it seems very appropriate to emphasise the notion of a project, a collective endeavour on which humankind has embarked upon ever since late medieval city communities developed more elaborate ideas on how justice and the rule of law can nurture the bonds between the citizens of a given polity. In that sense, any substantial form of peace is not only the result of evolutionary advances and of changing value systems or more recent claims for entitlement, as Pinker suggests. Peace has to be constructed and established ('stiften', invoking the connotations of an endowment and a constitution, is the term used by Kant). And in that sense, any proper explanation of the decline in violence in recent times has to give due attention to both peace-keeping and peace-building, two topics which receive virtually no attention by Pinker.

Notes

1. Brian Ferguson, 'Review of Lawrence Keeley, war before civilization. The myth of the peaceful savage?', *American Anthropologist*, 99 (1997), 424f.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Gerd Schwerhoff, 'Zivilisationsprozess und Geschichtswissenschaft. Norbert Elias Forschungsparadigma in historischer Sicht?', *Historische Zeitschrift*, 266 (1998), 561-605, here 573-81; the attempt to rebut these criticisms by Pieter Spierenburg, 'Violence and the civilizing process: does it work?', *Crime, History & Societies*, 5 (2001), 87-105, refuses to engage properly with Schwerhoff's argument, and offers a mere caricature of his position.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Dieter Langewiesche has made this point a couple of years ago, and has urged historians to make systematic use of the quantitative evidence provided by databases such as the 'Correlates of war' project, which Pinker uses throughout his book. See Dieter Langewiesche, 'Eskalierte die Kriegsgewalt im Laufe der Geschichte?', in *Moderne Zeiten? Krieg, Revolution und Gewalt im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Jörg Baberowski (Göttingen, 2006), pp. 12-36.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Thorsten Bonacker, 'Zuschreibungen der Gewalt. Zur Sinnförmigkeit interaktiver, organisierter und gesellschaftlicher Gewalt?', *Soziale Welt*, 53 (2002), 31-48.[Back to \(4\)](#)

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http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/BOOK_20120111_1.htm [3]

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/09/books/review/the-better-angels-of-our-nature-by-steven-pinker-book-review.html> [4]

Scientific American

<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm> [5]

Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/sep/22/better-angels-steven-pinker-review> [6]

Telegraph

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[7]

Wall Street Journal

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111904332804576537813826824914.html> [8]

Foseti

<http://foseti.wordpress.com/2012/03/29/review-of-the-better-angels-of-our-nature-by-steven-pinker/> [9]

Daily Beast

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2011/10/02/steven-pinker-s-better-angels-of-our-nature-review.html> [10]

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Mind Hacks

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[8] <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111904332804576537813826824914.html>

[9] <http://foseti.wordpress.com/2012/03/29/review-of-the-better-angels-of-our-nature-by-steven-pinker/>

[10] <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2011/10/02/steven-pinker-s-better-angels-of-our-nature-review.html>

[11] <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-better-angels-of-our-nature-the-decline-of-violence-in-history-and-its-causes-by-steven-pinker-2366392.html>

[12] <http://mindhacks.com/2011/10/18/a-review-of-pinkers-the-better-angels-of-our-nature/>

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