

It's getting better all the time

Steven Pinker on the general decline of violence in modern times

Gerald Mackenthun (Berlin), version dated 10 March 2020

Abstract: With its two world wars, the 20th century is considered to be the worst century of mankind ever. The 21st century hardly seems to begin less cruelly. In contrary to that Harvard professor Steven Pinker (b. 1954) explains in his book *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (2012), that violence and cruelty have greatly decreased. Cruel legal punishments, beatings of children, murder and manslaughter have fallen sharply worldwide since the Second World War – however not evenly and not everywhere. There are fewer civil wars, fewer genocides and a reduction in homicide rates and violent crimes. Pinker cites several reasons for this, especially the establishment of a state monopoly on governmental authority. This in turn is a consequence of the European Enlightenment, beginning in the middle of the 18th century in France. In this lecture, Pinker's optimistic theses will be presented and discussed.

Inhalt: Das 20. Jahrhundert mit seinen zwei Weltkriegen gilt mit als das schlimmste Jahrhundert der Menschheit überhaupt. Das 21. Jahrhundert beginnt scheinbar kaum weniger grausam. Harvard-Professor Steven Pinker (geb. 1954) erläutert dem gegenüber in seinem Buch *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (2012, dt. *Gewalt: Eine neue Geschichte der Menschheit*, 2013) seine These, dass Gewalt und Grausamkeiten stark abgenommen haben, wenn auch nicht gleichmäßig und nicht überall gleichzeitig. Grausame juristische Strafen, Prügelstrafen für Kinder, Mord und Totschlag seien seit dem Zweiten Weltkrieg weltweit stark zurückgegangen. Es gibt weniger Bürgerkriege, weniger Genozide und es gibt eine Reduktion der Mordraten und der gewalttätigen Verbrechen. Pinker führt dazu mehrere Gründe an, vor allem die Etablierung eines Gewaltmonopols in den Nationalstaaten. Das wiederum sei eine Folge der europäischen Aufklärung. In dem Aufsatz werden Pinkers optimistische Thesen vorgestellt und diskutiert.

Pinker: violence and aggression have declined

Steven Pinker was born in Montreal in 1954. He is an experimental psychologist, cognitive scientist, linguist and popular science writer. He is a professor at Harvard College in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He is author of several books for a general audience. One of them is *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, published in 2011. The main thesis of his book is that violence has decreased throughout history.¹

Pinker's thesis of the decline in violence has surprised many. Images such as those of the Auschwitz concentration camp, the Second World War, the wars and the hunger crises that followed have been engraved into the consciousness of many of us. The 20th century, with its two world wars, is considered the worst century of humanity ever. The 21st century is

¹ I have therefore placed my lecture under the motto *It's getting better all the time*. The older ones of you may still remember this Beatles song from 1967.

apparently hardly beginning better. We have already witnessed the attacks of September 11th, the two wars in Iraq and the war against the Islamic state.

Steven Pinker's theses, in contrast, are: that our ancestors were much more violent than we are, that violence has been on the decline worldwide for several decades, and that today we live in perhaps one of the most peaceful times since our species has existed.²

Let's have a look at the data.

Lawrence Keeley³ has investigated the causes and rates of death of hunters and gatherers in small communities who are still in existence.⁴ 1996 Keeley published his book with the title *War before Civilization. The Myth of the Peaceful Savage*.

He compared the percentage of deaths among men killed by the hand of another man to the percentage of natural causes of death. The rates vary from 5 to nearly 60 per cent. According to the corresponding statistics of the United States and the states in Europe in the 20th century, which include all deaths including those of the two world wars, the proportion of violent deaths has been less than two percent for about 100 years.

Cruel social punishments

For many centuries, mutilation and torture were routine punishments for criminal offences. For things for which you get a ticket today, you would have had your hand cut off, your tongue or ears cut off, you would have been blinded, roasted or quartered at the stake, or your skin peeled off. The death penalty was usual for a long list of non-violent offences such as criticising the king, homosexuality, blasphemy or stealing bread. Slavery was self-evident⁵. Cruelty was a widespread form of entertainment, for example gladiator fights or burning of witches.⁶

The comparison with earlier times clearly shows a strong reduction. Only 100 years ago, corporal punishment of children was a natural right of parents and teachers. In all civilized countries today this is forbidden. Domestic violence - mostly that of men against women - is now considered a violent crime. The European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, adopted by the Council of Europe in 1950, prohibits cruel and degrading punishment. Torture, slavery and forced labour are expressly prohibited by the Convention, and all states accept it.⁷

Blood and thunder

How about homicide? The criminologist and Cambridge professor Manuel Eisner collected all historical records in Europe for murder rates in every village, town or country he could find. He combined this data with nationwide statistics (*Long-Term Historical Trends in Violent Crime*. The

² A decline in violence could be observed all over the world. This does not mean that it has disappeared completely. The decline is not homogeneous. But there is reason for optimism, because humanity has learned some important lessons.

³ He is Professor of Archaeology at the University of Illinois in Chicago, specializing in prehistoric Europe.

⁴ Some of these tribes live in the Amazon and New Guinea.

⁵ although there was always Christian criticism of slavery

⁶ Animals were cruelly tortured to death to the cheering applause of bystanders.

⁷ From the late 18th century onwards, slavery was gradually abolished throughout the world, starting with Great Britain. With the ban in Mauritania 1981, no country in the world has had a legal basis for the slave trade and slavery anymore.

University of Chicago, 2003⁸). 100 deaths per 100,000 people per year was roughly the murder rate in the Middle Ages. The number drops to less than one murder per 100,000 people per year in seven or eight European countries today.

Since 1945 there has been a sharp decline in interstate wars, in ethnic riots, pogroms and military coups in Europe and America, even in South America. In particular, national, interstate conflicts have declined sharply, from over 60 in the decade 1950-1959 to just two or three in 2000-2005.

And there has been a steep decline in the number of deaths in interstate wars worldwide since 1950.⁹

Many more positive indicators

Many other indicators are also pointing in a positive direction.

The percentage of people living in extreme poverty has fallen sharply. (In 1820, 94 percent of the world's people were living in extreme poverty. In 2015, the amount was ten percent.)

The proportion of young people receiving primary education has increased significantly. (In 1820, 83 percent did not attend primary school. By 2015, the figure was 14 percent).

More and more people can read. (In 1820, 88 percent of people could not read. In 2014 14 percent were illiterate.)

Democracy as a form of government has become increasingly established. (In 1820, 99 percent of the people did not live in a democracy. In 2015 it was still 44 percent.)

More and more people are vaccinated against diseases and live longer. (In 1820, no one was vaccinated. By 2015, 86 percent of people are vaccinated).

Infant mortality has fallen sharply. (In 1820, 57 percent of children reached the age of five. In 2015, the figure was 96 percent.)¹⁰

Why is progress not seen?

Taking all this for granted, the question arises why so many people are convinced of the opposite? Steven Pinker has listed some of these reasons.

Media and aid organisations need bad news

A first reason is the role of the press. Nobody reaches large print runs, readers and viewers or

⁸ <https://www.vrc.crim.cam.ac.uk/system/files/documents/manuel-eisner-historical-trends-in-violence.pdf> (9 March 2020). See also Wikipedia: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Innere_Sicherheit (8 May 2019). See also <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1147697?seq=1>

⁹ As seen in these statistics, the death rate fell from 65,000 deaths per conflict per year in the 1950s to 2,000 deaths per conflict per year in our decade. This trend continued in the late 1960s, early 1970s and the end of the Cold War. Battle death data: <https://www.prio.org/Data/Armed-Conflict/Battle-Deaths/> (9. März 2020), ebenso <https://www.prio.org/Publications/Publication/?x=7053> (9. März 2020)

¹⁰ Data sources: Extreme Poverty: Bourguignon & Morrison (2002) up to 1970 -World Bank 1981 and later (2015 is a projection). Vaccination: WHO (Global data are available for 1980 to 2015 - the OPT3 vaccination was licenced in 1949) Education: OECD for the period 1820 to 1960. IIASA for the time thereafter. Literacy: OECD for the period 1820 to 1990. UNESCO for 2004 and later.

even donors by saying that things are obviously getting better and better. The business model of the media and aid organisations has no interest in good news. The media as a whole are faithful chroniclers of all the wars, misfortunes, disasters and murders of this world. Reports of violence burn themselves more into the memory than reports that the vast majority of people die in their beds from old age and chronic illness.

Permanent criticism of western civilization

As a second reason, Pinker cites the refusal of intellectuals to take note of the actual development of the world or of continents. He accuses them of being ignorant on the one hand and pessimistic on the other. They are unwilling to acknowledge progress.¹¹

This pessimism is combined with an ongoing critique of Western civilization and Western capitalism. Many people believe that the Western way of life and Western expansionism are basically responsible for all the evils in the world. When it is stated that girls' schooling has greatly increased and illiteracy has impressively decreased, they complain about the missing rest.¹²

Reasons for the decrease in violence

However, how could it have happened, that the level of violence fell so sharply? The reasons are not entirely clear.

Has our species changed in its nature?

Man in his genetic make-up and in his basal desires and drives will certainly not have changed. Under this aspect, humanistic progress of our species is rather unlikely. The "dark side" of man will not have changed significantly. There are still people who are violent because they do not control their passions or because they see aggression and destruction as a means to achieve their goals. But their number has obviously decreased.

Pinker notes that the general attitude towards cruelty and violence is changing towards rejection. More and more people have become weary of violence in their time. However, as the aversion against violence spreads, the remnants of violence are perceived all the more clearly.

State monopoly on the use of force

In the absence of a state monopoly on the use of force, the arming of many people was a major cause of constant violence. The solution was the Leviathan, as the British philosopher Thomas Hobbes called it, an authority for the legitimate use of force in a single state agency, the police. Nation and state building made warfare a relatively regulated affair. No doubt wars were fought by nations, but at the same time nation-building meant pacification of domestic violence through the state's monopoly on the use of force. In conjunction with the judicial system, the threat of punishment and punishments often have a deterrent effect, although not continuously.

¹¹ Pinker speaks of a cognitive illusion.

¹² If anywhere in the world someone is sentenced to 100 cane blows for adultery or to prison for homosexuality, it is in our newspapers and it causes outrage. It is not considered that in earlier centuries such offences were punished with death at the stake. Furthermore, there were no fair trials. Today we consider the death penalty to be barbaric and out of step with the times.

State prosecution eliminates the need for a private retaliation mechanism.¹³ Vigilante justice is fundamentally prohibited in civilised states and self-defence is only permitted within the narrow limits of self-protection.¹⁴

Deterrence

Another reason for the decrease in violence is deterrence. You will not attack first, but you have publicly announced that if you are attacked you will retaliate with all your might. This can only work if it is not seen through as a bluff, but is based on real armament. Deterrence must be credible. However, this does not deter some, leading to a bloody cycle of violence without beginning or end. Examples of this are Palestine and Israel, India and Pakistan, or Catholics and Protestants in Ireland.

Life became more precious

If suffering and early death are common, there is less reason to appreciate live. There are then less inhibitions to harm and kill others or to put oneself in danger. However, when hygiene, technology, medicine, increasing prosperity and legal security have made life longer and more beautiful, the individual also has a higher opinion of life in general. In the Enlightenment and humanism, human life became the highest good.

Advantages of the cooperation

A further explanation refers to the concept of a "non-zero-sum game". It was described in the book *Nonzero. The Logic of Human Destiny* (2001) by journalist Robert Wright. He argues that biological evolution, like cultural evolution, is based on the constant improvement of cooperation, which is why human morality has improved over time. However, one can reflect on Wright's thesis that under certain circumstances non-destructive cooperation brings benefits to both partners, for example in action, when both sides can achieve mutual gains. Or when two parties lay down their weapons and share the so-called peace dividend. Peace dividends are those sums of money that do not have to be spent to fight, but are available for other, necessary things.¹⁵ The trade of goods, services and ideas over longer distances and among larger groups of people has increased mutual understanding and trust. The result is that people become more valuable alive than dead.¹⁶

Expanding the capacity for empathy

A last explanation is provided by a book entitled *The Expanding Circle. Ethics, Evolution, and Moral Progress* (2011) by Australian philosopher and ethicist Peter Singer. He argues that evolution has inherited a sense of empathy for people. Empathy is the ability to empathize and

¹³ Nowadays, the possibility of legally arming oneself is very limited in Europe. In the USA, this issue is discussed again after every school massacre, without drastic changes. The killing rate in the USA today is 5.5 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants, 1.2 in Germany and 0.5 in Switzerland. But remember that in earlier centuries this rate was 100 or higher (s. Wikipedia, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tötungsrate_nach_Ländern (March 8th 2020).

¹⁴ The many Hollywood vigilante movies in which murder is committed without hesitation may serve a deeply rooted need to take the law into one's own hands.

¹⁵ White argues that the number of such agreements or "games" has increased because the advantages of a win-win situation have become increasingly clear.

¹⁶ Violence is thus reduced for selfish reasons.

feel with others, including their pain and sorrow. Unfortunately, in the first instance we apply sympathy and solidarity only to a small circle of friends and families. People outside this circle have been and are ignored or repulsed. For many centuries they were allowed to be attacked and exploited with impunity. But in the course of history this circle has expanded. Natural law has been extended to include human rights, which in principle are granted to all people, regardless of gender and ethnicity.¹⁷

But this is only a description, not a justification. What triggered this empathy expansion? There are a number of possible answers.

One argument is that of Robert Wright with the expanding circles of reciprocity.

Secondly, the logic of the golden rule: Do not do anything to anyone that you do not want to avoid on yourself. Basically, this again is the argument of empathy. Here again the free exchange of goods, services, ideas and people comes into play.¹⁸ On a higher level we realize, how the universal human rights formulate it: People may be different, but they are fundamentally equal.

The Enlightenment works

In 1933, Albert Einstein also asked Sigmund Freud the question "Why war?" Freud answered with reference to a fundamentally aggressive-destructive potential of man. In 1933, Europeans had gone through a world war and were faced with the challenge of reacting to aggressive German National Socialism. During this pessimistic period, no one could imagine a peaceful Europe and a peaceful world. Today, Europe has lived in peace for over 70 years. Does this refute Freud's thesis of the aggression drive in the human species?

Steven Pinker, contrary to Einstein, asks the question, "Why is there peace?" Not only: what goes wrong when there is war, but also: what have we done right when there is peace? Does this also put an end to Freud's precarious hypothesis of the death drive? Because obviously many people have done many things right in the past centuries. We should continue to think about what this could be.

**The progress we have achieved so far is based on the combination of reason and science, on judgement and empiricism. But progress is not compulsory. Progress does not mean that everything will always be better, for everyone everywhere at all times. Progress is problem solving. Solutions often create new problems, which in turn must be solved in their own way. The current problems appear to be gigantic, including climate change. We will never have a perfect world, Pinker stresses in his books and lectures. But there is no limit to improvement if we use knowledge to extend human well-being.

Pinker concluded one of his lectures with the following words: "All it takes is the insight that life is better than death, that health is better than disease, abundance is better than want, freedom is better than coercion, happiness is better than suffering, trust is better than mistrust, democracy is better than anarchy, reconciliation is better than revenge, and that knowledge is

¹⁷ For some time now, there has been a serious discussion about extending respecting rights to animals and nature in general.

¹⁸ The more one interacts with other people, the more one realizes the groundless privilege of one's own interests over those of others.

better than ignorance and superstition.”

But life experience also says: Self-assertion is better than submission, victory is better than defeat, suppression is better than being suppressed, having more is better than having little, success is better than failure. Some forms of violence and aggression will never go back to zero.¹⁹ But all live better with less violence and aggression. We must reckon with the dark sides of human nature, but also with reason and the effect of enlightenment.²⁰

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Steven Pinker: Is the world getting better or worse? A look at the numbers. Lecture (without date and place, probably 2018): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCm9Ng0bbEQ> (viewed on May 11th 2019)

Steven Pinker: The surprising decline in violence (no date and place): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ramBFRt1Uzk=33s> (viewed on May 11th 2019)

Steven Pinker (2012) *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (deutsch: *Gewalt: Eine neue Geschichte der Menschheit*, 2013)

Steven Pinker on Violence (2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nD3UiG49Q4w>, January 16th 2013 (viewed March 10th 2020), also with interesting reflections on Freud's hypotheses of aggression and Thanatos.

Steven Pinker (2018) *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress: For Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress. A Defence* (deutsch: *Aufklärung jetzt: Für Vernunft, Wissenschaft, Humanismus und Fortschritt. Eine Verteidigung*, 2018)

Steven Pinker (2018) *Die Aufklärung funktioniert*; NZZ, 21. Februar 2018

Steven Pinker (2019) *Enlightenment Wars: Some Reflections on 'Enlightenment Now,' One Year Later*, Quillette, 3. März 2019, <https://quillette.com/2019/01/14/enlightenment-wars-some-reflections-on-enlightenment-now-one-year-later/> (viewed August 9th 2019)

Interview with Steven Pinker (2018a) Steven Pinker: “Die Toilette war eine großartige Erfindung” [“The toilet was a great invention”]; NZZ, November 15th 2018

Interview with Steven Pinker (2018b) *Alles wird besser, und er kann's beweisen* [Everything is getting better, and he can prove it]; *Der Spiegel*, February 16th 2018

Matt Ridley (2019) “Rosa Brille war gestern. Aber warum eigentlich sehen wir die Welt so gerne

¹⁹ Some forms of aggression will never disappear completely, such as murder or terrorism. Other forms have disappeared completely and will hopefully remain so: state-sanctioned slavery or religiously motivated human sacrifice. Perhaps war between states can be abolished completely. Child abuse and domestic violence are tending towards zero. This should not be turned into a teleology of history as we know it from Hegel or Marx. It is enough to take note of the facts. Predictions for the future should not be made.

²⁰ In the year since *Enlightenment Now* (2018) went to press, other books have drawn similarly positive conclusions about the state of the world: Gregg Easterbrook's *It's Better Than Than It's Looks*, Bobby Duffy's *The Perils of Perception*, Hans and Ola Rosling and Anna Rosling Rönnlunds *Factfulness*, Michael Cohen and Micah Zenko's *Clear and Present Safety* or Ruy Teixeira's *The Optimistic Leftist*.

schwarz?“ [Pink glasses was yesterday. But why do we actually like to see the world in black?]
NZZ, February 2nd 2019