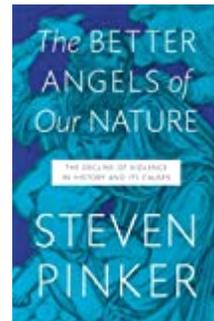




Steven Pinker. *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined.* London: Penguin Books, 2011. 832 S. \$67.75 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84614-093-8.



Reviewed by Benjamin Ziemann

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (March, 2012)

S. Pinker: The Better Angels of our Nature

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 twentieth century, was an age of large-scale bloodshed and genocidal slaughter. Quite to the contrary, Pinker argues, the last two decades 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. The vast amount of evidence 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 into 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 mentioning briefly. There is first the notion of a "civilizing process", as developed by Norbert Elias 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). 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. The second key factor for the decline of violence Pinker identifies is the "humanitarian revolution" of the seventeenth and eighteenth 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 eighteenth century reading revolution with increasing rates of literacy and mass circulation of books. The reading of novels, Pinker argues, allowed 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 for the human cost of war. Other factors include the 'rights revolutions' of the post-1945 period, including civil, women's and gay rights.

There are many reasons why Pinker's book can at best be only a starting point for a much more nuanced and historically informed investigation into the long-term decline of violence over the past five millennia. 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 twenty-first 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. But does this really mean that the present situation is aptly described as 'peace'? And is the quantitative evidence sufficiently reliable to underpin the details of Pinker's argument, and sufficient as an historical explanation?

In my view, the answer to these 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 nonstate societies is taken from a book by Lawrence Keeley. Yet experts in pre-historic archaeology have noted that archaeological evidence '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 a number of other places. Brian Ferguson, *Review of Lawrence Keeley, War before Civilization. The Myth of the Peaceful Savage*, in: *American Anthropologist* 99 (1997), 424f. Given the scattered nature of archaeological evidence, Pinker confronts the reader with graphs which suggest a level of accuracy which is unobtainable for pre-historic times (p. 49).

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's utterly simplifying portrait of late medieval European societies, which is the necessary backdrop for his argument about the 'civilizing process'. For example, Pinker reproduces two illustrations from the late 15th century 'Housebook' which Elias had already 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 utterly misleading already by the standards of historical knowledge 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. Gerd Schwerhoff, *Zivilisationsprozess und Geschichtswissenschaft. Norbert Elias Forschungsparadigma in historischer Sicht*, in: *Historische Zeitschrift* 266 (1998), 561-605, here 573-581.

Yet unconvincing is not only the degree of accuracy Pinker suggests is achievable in the calculation of rates of violence across the centuries and millennia. 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 actual estimate death toll of twenty 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). Is it historically insightful to compare the deaths during the Mideast and Atlantic slave trades, having occurred from the 7th to the 19th and 15th to 19th century respectively (and given third and eighth place in 'adjusted' rank) with 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. And it is irritating to see that Pinker,

whenever he is prompted to consider 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" (209), and again Hitler alone "almostly responsible" for World War Two (248).

To sum up: Pinker's bold attempt to chart and explain the decline of violence across the millennia has its

merits, not least because it aims to begin an interdisciplinary dialogue and to trace changes over such an extended period of time. From a historian's point of view, however, the severe limits and pitfalls of his argument must be stressed. The limitations of the quantitative evidence are striking, as is the failure to provide a proper historical contextualization, and to account for the ways in which violence is embedded in social institutions.

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Citation: Benjamin Ziemann. Review of Pinker, Steven, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. March, 2012.

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