



History, Violence, and Steven Pinker

Mark S. Micale and Philip Dwyer



In the closing months of 2011, Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker published *The Better Angels of Our Nature: The Decline of Violence in History and Its Causes*.¹ Weighing in at over eight hundred closely printed pages, Pinker's book advances a bold, revisionist thesis: despite the relentless deluge of violent, sensationalist stories in the pervasive electronic media of our day, Pinker proposes, violence in the human world, in nearly every form, has in fact declined dramatically. Over the past several thousand years, and particularly since the eighteenth century, homicides, criminal assaults, war casualties, domestic violence, child abuse, animal abuse, capital punishment, lynching, and rape have all been steadily diminishing in frequency.

This might at first seem illogical given that an estimated 160–180 million people were killed as a direct result of war and genocide—consider World Wars I and II, the Holocaust, Stalin's Russia, Mao's China, and Pol Pot's Cambodia—but Pinker argues that killing as a per capita estimate was much higher in previous centuries. Indeed, it appears to have been higher the further one goes back in time, so that nonstate societies in earlier centuries had death rates of anywhere between 0 and 60 percent, with an average of 15 percent, while the total number of overall deaths in the twentieth century represents an overall death rate of only 3 percent. To buttress this original argument, the author assembled countless statistical “data sets” and over a hundred charts and graphs.

With a thesis so novel and counterintuitive, presented in a tone of such self-assurance, Pinker's book attracted a great deal of attention upon its appearance several years ago. In the United States and United Kingdom, the initial coverage included lengthy discussions in venues such as the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, the *American Scholar*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Spectator*, *Slate*, the *Huffington Post*, *Scientific American*, *Foreign Policy*, and the *Daily Telegraph*. A number of publications ran follow-up articles. The current Wikipedia entry for Pinker's tome, which canvasses both praise for and criticism of the book, quotes from 30 reviews.² In these early assessments, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, theologians, scientists, foreign policy experts, philosophers, and popular science writers, as well as public intellectuals, all had their say.



Curiously, very few academic historians were included in this first wave of critical reviewers.³

The absence of historians from the early commentary on Pinker's book is unfortunate. In his home disciplines of cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics, Pinker is very well-known. In numerous earlier works in these fields, he demonstrated a talent for intellectually ambitious projects, grand (if not extravagant) interpretations, and wide-ranging syntheses combined with a skill for popular scientific exposition. Unlike his earlier volumes, however, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, in its core arguments and its key source materials, is specifically historical.

Pinker's postulation of a *longue durée* decline in human violence cites an array of horrible past practices—ranging from torture, gladiatorial displays of fighting to the death, and burning religious heretics, to breaking on the rack, tarring and feathering, and the corporal punishment of children—that have either been replaced by greater restraint or abolished altogether in modern times. Fueling this steady retreat from violent practices in the past few centuries, Pinker asserts, has been the increasing importance of empathy, self-control, social cooperation, and rational thinking in governing human affairs, rather than our species' darker and more primitive capacities for aggression, including murder.

In this process of progressive self-pacification, Pinker places special emphasis on the Enlightenment, broadly conceived, which initiated "the humanitarian revolution." The growing adoption of rationality in government, the rise of concepts of political and civil rights, the emergence of the idea of religious toleration, the development of a more cosmopolitan outlook on foreign cultures, and the consolidation of the modern nation-state with its stabilizing monopoly on the legal, legitimate use of force are among the most important civilizing, humanitarian sources of change that Pinker posits. These transformations, he continues, were reinforced by at least two other, roughly coterminous, forces: in the economic realm, an increasingly global development of the exchange of trade goods, which required cooperation rather than conflict with foreigners, and, in the world of gender, "feminization," or a growing respect for and adoption of "the interests and values of women" in contrast to the more martial, masculinist outlooks that predominated during prehistoric, ancient, and medieval eras. As every reader of this journal will readily recognize, these ideas are historical in nature, and rich and voluminous bodies of scholarship exist on all of them.

A second context for this special issue of *Historical Reflections* transcends any one field of inquiry. In the early twenty-first century, "the history of violence" is rapidly emerging as a productive new research site at the interface of history, psychology, and anthropology, among other disciplines. Historical scholarship on violence now flourishes, including both general longitudinal surveys and specialized studies of single categories of violence and of violent activity in particular past times and places.⁴ A multivolume history of violence from prehistoric times to the present is underway by Cambridge Uni-

versity Press.⁵ More and more interdisciplinary conferences with violence as a central theme are being organized internationally. Not least significant is a burgeoning interest in the subject among university students, who often serve as excellent barometers of emerging areas of contemporary interest. Master's theses and doctoral dissertations dealing with the history of violence are proliferating, and college courses as well as graduate seminars on the subject are beginning to appear in history curricula. And in 2011, the same year Pinker's book appeared, the University of Newcastle in Australia established the first Centre for the History of Violence. Can a journal, digital bibliography, and world congress be far behind?

It is always exciting to observe the formation of a new field of historical knowledge, especially one as resonant politically and morally as this one is. As a subdiscipline first takes shape, the appropriate subject matter of the field, its basic analytical frameworks, the best methodologies to employ, and the key questions to investigate are all open for discussion. Which brings us back to Pinker. A quick check of book prefaces, article footnotes, promotional materials, conference programs, project proposals, and course syllabuses indicates that Pinker's tome is being cited extensively as a major interpretative point of departure for this new historical initiative. In fact, Pinker's *Better Angels of Our Nature* appears second only to Norbert Elias's *The Civilizing Process* in the frequency of its citation.⁶ Given the sweeping breadth of its coverage, its outspoken revisionism, and the author's knack for "big ideas," this is perhaps inevitable. Furthermore, Pinker's book, it should be noted, often serves in these sources as a reading to consider, confront, and contest. Nevertheless, if Pinker's book is elevated into a founding statement in the historiography of human violence—if, that is, it constitutes a "thesis," akin in their respective historiographies to, say, the "Weber Thesis," the "Turner Frontier Thesis," the "Pirenne Thesis," the "Hobson/Lenin Thesis," or "the Boswell Thesis"—then surely the interpretation requires close and systematic evaluation by the very group of trained experts tasked by society with studying history responsibly, professionally, and institutionally.

Finally, we believe that such an intervention might be urgent, which brings us to the third motivation for this special issue. Pinker's work has had such an impact on the popular imagination that historians of violence can no longer avoid it. This popular acceptance of his work came to the fore quite recently when, on 16 May 2017, a remarkable posting on the social media site Twitter appeared. The tweet came from Bill Gates, the famous Microsoft founder and one of the richest people on the planet. Gates directed his message to college students, who were then completing their studies in great numbers across North America and Europe. In his tweet, Gates recommended that all graduating students read Pinker's *Better Angels of Our Nature*. "[Pinker] shows how the world is getting better," Gates proclaimed. "Sounds crazy but it's true. This is the most peaceful time in human history." "That matters," Gates added, "because if you think the world is getting better, you want to spread the progress to more people and places."⁷ Gates went on to

link the idea of a momentous long-term decline in violence with both personal happiness and an optimistic view of social modernity. In a later, even more euphoric, pronouncement Gates declared that “if I could give each of you a graduation gift, it would be this—the most inspiring book I’ve ever read.”⁸

News of Gates’s ecstatic online endorsement quickly “went viral.” Many leading Anglophone newspapers reported the story, often including excerpts from Gates’s comments and printing article headlines that “things are actually getting better in the world today.” Indeed, we learned of Gates’s tweet from a full-page article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The combined effect of this publicity was to catapult Pinker’s book to the very top of the bestseller list on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) during the summer months of 2017.

If *Better Angels of Our Nature* helps to motivate the public generosity of a billionaire philanthropist, then that is an unexpected beneficial effect. What surely emerges from these events, however, is that Pinker’s book has become a general cultural phenomenon. Its ideas are entering mainstream public discourse and are beginning to inform the activities and outlook of some of the most prominent and influential people today. For better or worse, the Pinker Thesis is spreading globally.

That is why we strongly believe—and the editorial board of *Historical Reflections* agrees—that the time is ripe for the community of academic historians to formally engage with Pinker’s ideas. We have assembled a set of critical essays, written by a group of accomplished senior historians, that evaluate *The Better Angels of Our Nature* by the standards of professional historical scholarship. We have chosen our contributing authors not only because of their distinguished careers but because of the diversity of historical specialties they represent: this will allow an examination of Pinker’s book, and its component parts, from as many empirical and analytical vantage points as possible. Thus, we include articles that study violence in prehistory, ancient Mediterranean societies, medieval Europe, early modern Russia, the European Enlightenment, interwar Africa and the Middle East, and European fascism. Supplementing these geochronological perspectives are thematic articles that take up sexual violence, violence and the history of science and technology, and violence and neurohistory. We are keenly aware that many additional histories (above all, of China) could profitably be included were space limitations not a concern.

Not all of the scholars included in this journal agree on everything, but the overall verdict is that Pinker’s thesis, for all the stimulus it may have given to discussions around violence, is seriously, if not fatally, flawed. The problems that come up time and again are: the failure to genuinely engage with historical methodologies; the unquestioning use of dubious sources; the tendency to exaggerate the violence of the past in order to contrast it with the supposed peacefulness of the modern era; the creation of a number of straw men, which Pinker then goes on to debunk; and its extraordinarily Western-centric, not to say Whiggish, view of the world. Complex historical

questions, as the essays in this volume clearly demonstrate, cannot be answered with any degree of certainty, and certainly not in a simplistic way. Our goal here is not to offer a final, definitive verdict on Pinker's work; it is, rather, to initiate an ongoing process of assessment that in the future will incorporate as much of the history profession as possible.

Mark S. Micale is Professor of History at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. The author or editor of seven books, his work focuses on European intellectual and medical history and the history of masculinities.

Philip Dwyer is Professor of History and founding Director of the Centre for the History of Violence at the University of Newcastle, Australia. He has written on the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, memoirs, violence, and colonialism, and is the general editor (with Joy Damousi) of the four-volume Cambridge World History of Violence, forthcoming from Cambridge University Press.

Notes

1. Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: The Decline of Violence in History and Its Causes* (London: Allen Lane, 2011).
2. Wikipedia.com, "The Better Angels of Our Nature," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Better_Angels_of_Our_Nature (accessed 22 January 2018).
3. For two exceptions, see Mark S. Micale, "Improvements," *Times Literary Supplement* (9 March 2012); and Michael Shermer, "Getting Better All the Time," *American Scholar* (Autumn, 2011), <https://theamericanscholar.org/getting-better-all-the-time/#.WnKbl9QrJiw> (accessed 22 January 2018).
4. For an early attempt to organize some of this scholarship historiographically, see Gregory Hanlon, "Review-Article: The Decline of Violence in the West: From Cultural to Post-Cultural History," *English Historical Review* 128, no. 531 (April 2013): 367–400, http://www.academia.edu/5038629/The_Decline_of_Violence_in_the_West_from_cultural_to_post-cultural_history_review_article.
5. Philip Dwyer and Joy Damousi, eds., *The Cambridge World History of Violence*, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).
6. See Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, rev. ed., trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000).
7. See Bill Gates, *gatesnotes*, "Better Angels of Our Nature in Graphs & Numbers," <https://www.gatesnotes.com/About-Bill-Gates/Better-Angels-of-Our-Nature-in-Graphs-and-Numbers>, and "My New Favorite Book of All Time," <https://www.gatesnotes.com/Books/Enlightenment-Now> (accessed 30 March 2018).
8. Billionaires seem drawn to the book. See also Rhiannon Williams, "Mark Zuckerberg's Year of Books: The Full List," *Daily Telegraph*, 1 February 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/mark-zuckerger/11379640/Marck-Zuckerbergs-Year-of-Books-the-full-list.html> (accessed 16 January 2018).