

## Book Reviews

***The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined.* By Steven Pinker. Penguin Publishing Group, 2012. ISBN-13: 9780143122012.**

In engaging with the debate over the decisive role that institutional processes have on human social evolution, this article questions the validity of Pinker's (2011) which holds the world is currently seeing a far more peaceful situation than it was typically in the past; owing to the importance of five major social progress: pacification process, civilizing process, humanitarian revolution, Long Peace and New Peace. In contrast to Pinker's account, this article builds on the need for contextual rather than causal analysis of warfare to explain today's prevalence of violence.

Steven Pinker sets two goals in his book. First, he aims to make the case that, far from the conventional wisdom, there has been a notable decline in different forms of violence throughout the evolutionary history of mankind, especially since the development of the nation-states. While a great deal of empirical evidence is presented in support of his thesis, this essay problematizes Pinker's lack of credibility in the use of the statistical method and, ultimately, the accompanying interpretation of empirical data presented in his book. Second, he seeks to provide explanations about the causes of this trend, which is important to know because it helps to understand whether this pattern is likely to persist. Yet again, his explanations are not only insufficiently argued but also contain a significant logical flaw, as we shall see in this essay.

### **Pinker: Flaws and Critique**

Perhaps the most compelling pieces of evidence in Pinker's (2011) are war death and homicide rates. By comparing statistics of

violent, war-driven death in pre-historic societies and the ones in the modern world, Pinker argues, one could clearly observe the decline in violence. An implied preposition in this analysis is that primitive societies were much more violent than what people tend to imagine. However, though Pinker also deploys archaeological data such as the discovery of depressed skull fracture that is typically caused by blunt objects to further estimate the risk of violent death among the primitive humans (Pinker 2011), there remains a general lack of sufficient information about the life situation in pre-state societies to make this inference. In other words, the better archaeological data is needed, for example, to tell whether the 'broken' skulls are caused by a violent act or by accident. And yet, not only such archaeological information is of varying reliability and difficult to gauge, the archaeological study of the pre-state has been largely confined to a description of materials and technologies with people's livelihood, social organization and ideologies are gradually detached from the scope of archaeological speculation (Shanks and Tilley 1987). In his book, Scott (2009) argues that even the world's most historic population 'Zomia' were the people who left their land fleeing the state-making negative externalities and continued to live in the shadow of the state for more than two millennia. In this account, we could observe the life conditions of historic stateless societies, but the social history of entire mankind outside the civilization (in the state of nature) remains inadequately available.

Similarly, Pinker's (2011) chief measure — the statistical data — has some serious issues. First, while his main purpose is to estimate the percentage of prehistory war death, he fails to distinguish the war-related mortality from the one caused by violent raid or nasty oppression. To be sure, out of the eight cases used by Pinker, the first and the third highest percentages of what he considers

as the “state of nature” war morality actually represent the killings of indigenous societies by the intruders, rather than wars between hunter-gatherers (Fry 2013). Second, Pinker’s use of eight self-selected cases to present the entire primitive societies is inadequate. Notably, not only does he pick up the eight cases directly from Bowles’ (2009), his samplings of those cases represent only tiny empirical realities in the remote corners of society, history and geography. In their astonishing review of Pinker, Cirillo and Taleb (2015) reveal that Pinker’s (2011) data set of war fatalities occurring between 1 and 2015 AD demonstrates an extremely fat right-tail which makes him more inclined to arrive in his conclusion; since it allows him to eliminate the infiniteness of the mean which is not necessarily bounded.

More fundamentally, the problem in Pinker’s (2011) is not only the lack of reliable evidence of prehistory mankind, but it is the fact that the decrease in war-induced death, though being properly estimated, is not a standardized variable. Variations in the duration of warfare, the number of fatalities including battle death and civilian casualties during a war period, the total population at the time of wars, and especially the number of indirect mortality make it extremely hard to arrive in one overarching conclusion: today’s atrocity is at an all-time low (Torpey 2018, Fry 2013). What is more, Pinker deterministic approach renders him incapable of recording more complex security realities that emerge from the changing character and spaces of conflict today. More specifically, Pinker’s Long Peace thesis overlooks the emerging insecurity and conflict resulting from nuclear deterrence or limited war, which leads to the absence of major warfare in the first place (Gray 2005, Galtung 1996). As such, though it is true that direct war between nuclear states is a rarity, it has become the driving force to the new period

limited and proxy wars that have been taking place in different parts of the world.

Furthermore, not only estimating the quantities of violent, war-induced death is an empirical question, it is also moral. This is partly because humans tend to confront death and dying in their own lives and the lives of others by looking at their causes and effects (Steffen and Cooley 2014). Notably, questions about life and death invoke the debate on abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment and whatnot. The risk factors, terror, structural violence, collateral damage and post-war trauma should all feature as the logical consequences of violence. By failing to acknowledge the need for providing a more inclusive assessment of war-related deaths, given that not all violence results in bloodshed and not all lethal weapons cause sudden death as Gray (2005) correctly observes, Pinker’s approach is reductionist in a sense that it treats violence as a mere increase or decrease binaries. In this sense, Arquilla (2012) is right to point out that Pinker’s reliance on war death statistics compels him to accept his conclusions. For Arquilla, it is wrong to concentrate vigorously on the declining war casualties since such a trend is generally implicated in the ‘balance of terror’: nuclear weapons have hindered industrial-type war between major powers (Arquilla 2012).

Another neglected aspect of the war in Pinker (2011) is the current prevalence of different forms of ‘new war’ especially around the line of civilizational and cultural violence. Crucially, not only these conflicts are rising at a greater volume and pace in across the globe today, but their conducts also blur the important distinctions between the government, the soldiers and the civilians, the latter is usually not counted towards battle death according to Pinker. Unlike conventional wars, the ‘new’ war combatants rely on strategies that draw the entire society and their territory into conflicts as a means of

survival (Bassiouni 2008). In such context, the demarcating line between the legitimate state actor and armed non-state actor, public and private, international and domestic, material and ideological, and even war and peace are falling apart (Kaldor 2013). The implication of these differences is a greater risk of war and the risk of fatality from wars. Whereas traditional warfare tended to be feature two sides whose primary motivation is to gain victory, new wars tend to expand and to endure or repeat as both sides benefit politically or economically from warfare itself as instead of 'victory' (Keen 2012). Similarly, the increase in intensity of new wars questions Pinker's accounts on the causal link between today's level of peace with emergence of nation-states, civilized world, globalization and democracy; since new wars typically occur in authoritarian regimes that have been incapacitated as a result of opening up to the outside world (Kaldor 2013, Maitre 2009). In this way, new wars tend to contribute to the dismantling of the state and, thereby, creating more violence: a development that was not taken into account by Pinker.

### **Towards a More Reliable Approach**

It has been rather obvious hitherto that Pinker's empiricist approach is ill-equipped to deal with the changing nature of warfare and, ultimately, the definition of insecurity that does not fit into the winning-lose/life-death binaries. In Pinker's quest for empiricism, as I have shown earlier, the (flawed) data of war-related mortality prevails over the new realities and norms. Yet, a historical conflict and homicide research also requires looking at multiple conceptual definitions of violence that to a significant extent leads to different theoretical explanations about the traditional topics of the "Empirical Basis" and "Validation" of scientific knowledge (Koertge 2000, Monkkonen 2001). In a multifaceted security situation, thus, one

cannot rely solely on the old plain humanism to account for a much safer and happier world today than it was typically in the past. For one reason or another, it was the humanity's highly refined rational thoughts that give us the ability to overcome the intense emotional costs of killing and at the same time plan for conducts of war elaborately (Fry 2013). Even the construction of the justifications for European colonialism is deeply implicated in Enlightenment quests for unifying the mode of knowledge production and methodologies that are presented in the language of reasoning, civilization and modernity (Beier 2005, Jones 2006). As such, to move beyond an empirical assessment of violence is to acknowledge the emergent realities of violence that may not be captured merely through statistical analysis of homicide and war death rates.

Ultimately, making the case for a systematic comparison of theories would have to include some constructive analysis to be true. When it comes to the evolving conducts of war and security threats, constructivist approach is rendered productive since it offers an analytical tool to adjust theories to values and norms in order to generate visions of new realities (Galtung 1996). By locating actors and structures in a strategic continuum, constructivism sheds new understanding of war that is not centralized on strategic cost and benefit calculations (Zaman 2009). Understood in this way, countries and individuals think about violence and waged wars in different ways and with different purposes. It is these differences that create the fault-line conflict not only more often, but also 'more sustained and more violent than conflicts between groups in the same civilization' (Huntington 1997, 48). Crucially, by appealing to the constructivist mode of thought, the recognition of different purposes of war and killing would find relevance in Pinker's analysis. As such, while it may be the case that the state

full-fledged control over the use of violence has led some modern societies having falling levels of violent mortality, it is certainly the case that the modern state force has been mobilized worldwide for subjecting civilian populations into violent mass atrocities. In much of the same way, constructivist logics invite Pinker to appreciate the dark side of Enlightenment in constructing his conclusions.

In conclusion, as explained throughout, Pinker's goal to provide evidence that accounts for the falling homicide and violent combat death rates in the modern world is insufficient and, more often than not, misguided. The main issue being his failure to set up a productive analytical approach that lives up to his remarkably overarching research question: today's level of global violence is the lowest in history. While he has attempted to present the violence levels typically in the past by coupling empirical and archeological data of the prehistory mankind, he lacks the credibility to do so for mainly two reasons: the sheer limitation of archaeological evidence prior to the development of modern nation-state along with his flawed statistical analysis, and the his persistence to treat war mortalities as merely an empirical variable. Similarly, though this article makes only remote attempts to examine the actual trend in civilizational and cultural conflict over a longer time period, it has brought into attention the demand to incorporate constructivist approach into the study of violence in order to better comprehend its complexities which have been largely driven by the development in the new wars. For the reasons mentioned above, Pinker has and will continue to get the violence levels wrong, and the world is as violent as ever.

**Muhammad Fahmi Masdah**  
Australian National University  
[fahmimasda@gmail.com](mailto:fahmimasda@gmail.com)