

Books

# Pacific Bombshell

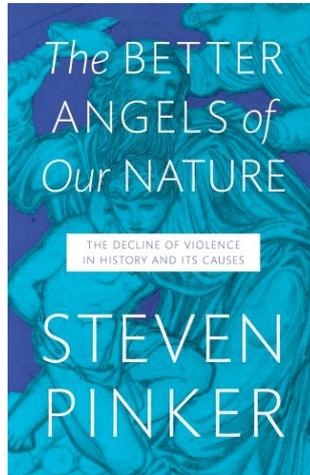
**J**OHN GRAY has tried to rubbish this terrific book, and that is almost a recommendation in itself. In many ways, it states the obvious – or at least what should have been obvious – but does it both readably and relentlessly, piling statistic upon statistic, graph upon graph, chart upon chart, reference upon reference and quote upon quote, in 802 pages, including a 32-page bibliography. If you're going to argue against its central thesis, then you will certainly have a job on your hands.

And what is it? Quite simply, that violence, whether in warfare, murders, domestic abuse, torture, rape, slavery or cruelty to animals, has been declining over long stretches of time. Although constant media exposure to serial killers, Nazi documentaries, ethnic 'cleansings', Hollywood movies and the like might suggest that we live in a sick world, the truth is that it is relatively peaceful compared to the nastiness in earlier eras. We may think that things are worse, but that is because our sensibilities have become more refined. In short, we may be living in the most peaceable era in our species' existence. Human progress is not a myth, after all: the better angels of our nature, to use Abraham Lincoln's phrase, have largely trumped our inner demons.

Pinker uses an interdisciplinary approach – combining archaeology, history, philosophy, economics, science and his own territory, psychology – to produce a brilliant synthesis that addresses much more than its ostensible subject of the decline in violence. It is indeed a polymathic behemoth of a book that teaches much about a lot, especially human nature, morality and human rights. Arguably, it might be included in any future list of books that changed the world.

So much evidence is adduced by Pinker in support of his thesis that only a sample can be offered here. He gives us a potted history of the world, through prehistory, Homeric Greece, the Hebrew Bible ('one long celebration of violence'), the Roman Empire and early Christendom, medieval knights, early modern Europe, right up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, for example, studies of the skeletons found on archaeological sites suggest that 15% of prehistoric humans met a violent death at the hands of another person. In the Middle Ages it wasn't much lower. But in Europe during the bloodiest periods of the modern era, the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>, it was about 3%. Leaving aside war and just considering murder, in 14<sup>th</sup> century Oxford there were 110 homicides per 100,000 people each year, while in 20<sup>th</sup> century London it was less than 1 per 100,000 (p60).

Consider also torture, which in earlier periods was woven into the fabric of public life. Crucifixion – an 'orgy of sadism' – is described in gruesome detail. The Inquisition also threw up some horrific punishments, such as Judas's Cradle, Breaking on the Wheel and the Cat's Paw. Medieval Christendom was indeed 'a culture of cruelty'.



Much of the book is concerned with the causes of the decline of violence. Firstly, there has been a pacification process, largely relating to the rise of the modern state, which suppresses the violence of the people and adjudicates disputes by means of police and courts. Hobbes has been proved substantially correct: without a state, life is likely to be 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'.

The state has also influenced the civilising process, along with the rise of commerce and international trade, which make nations increasingly dependent on one another. A third force has been a humanitarian revolution, beginning in the late 17 and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, which witnessed an onslaught on despotism, slavery, torture and cruelty to animals and

their replacement by democracy, education and literacy, the spread of wealth, the expanding 'circle of empathy' and Enlightenment Humanism.

As well as the 'Long Peace' since World War Two and the 'New Peace' since the end of the Cold War, there has also been a rights revolution, the growing demand for equality and dignity by ethnic minorities, women, children, homosexuals and animals, all of which have increased empathy, self-control and rationality and led to the decline of violence. Pinker's sections on these topics are a delight and educations in themselves, and what is so enthralling about the whole tome is that it is such a great advertisement for the entire Humanist project.

So what's John Gray's beef? In the October issue of *Prospect* magazine, he describes Pinker as a 'contemporary evangelist for Humanism' and his thesis as 'delusional'. He does not address the broad historical sweep of the book but confines himself largely to the period since the 18<sup>th</sup> century (with a glance back at Hobbes). He says that many Enlightenment thinkers were doctrinally anti-liberal and quite a few favoured the large-scale use of political violence. But it is typical of Gray's reasoning to make a case out of exceptions. Certainly, there was also an anti-Enlightenment in which we might place people like Rousseau or the Jacobins, but they were not typical. Gray also disputes the Long Peace, arguing that the rich countries have exported their conflicts, but Pinker correctly implies that those conflicts are more indigenous than imported and will decline as those societies advance to the level of Europe and North America. Gray also maintains, wrongly, that Pinker's belief in moral progress is incompatible with his Darwinism, but most Darwinists would believe that human morality has evolved.

The most glaring weakness of Gray's attack is that he picks over Pinker's *reasons* for the decline in violence while neglecting to counter the mass of evidence that Pinker presents to show that it has actually happened. The reason is that Gray does not want to accept the truth because it would radically conflict with his own fatalistic philosophy. So he focuses on some of Pinker's explanations while ignoring the empirical evidence. But, then, that is typical of John Gray's warped understanding of scholarship.