

Editorial
Event/Horizon - Tel-Aviv 2012
Studies - Speaking in Tongues II
Event/Anchor - London 2011
Special Dossier - Autism and Psychoanalysis
The letter! The litter! And the soother the bitther!
Hypermodern Times

Éric Laurent

The Discoveries of Evolutionary Psychology

You have to be a professor of psychology at Harvard, an author of scientific best sellers, an evolutionary psychologist, a pan-cognitive neuro-expert, a "serious cultural Jew", and have the writer-philosopher Rebecca Goldstein as your third wife, to be able to uphold the thesis that Steven Pinker sets out in his most recent book, which came out in November. It carries the fetching title: *The Better Angels of Our Nature*.¹ His thesis is straightforward: across human history violence has declined. The reason for this is set out in equally straightforward terms: our evolved brains can dominate our reptilian brains. This is part of the good news that evolutionary psychology is bringing. We are not determined by evolution in such a way that we remain stuck in the conditions of the past. We can evolve towards a better state.

The thesis is straightforward but it is underwritten by complicated proofs that include statistic calculus based on archaeological traces that yield the homicide rate in the earliest historical times. To this are added calculations, extrapolated from historical documents in conformity with conventional rules, showing that the homicide rate in England is now a hundredth of what it was around 1400. We also read anthropological reflections on the nature of acts of violence in stateless societies when compared with the effects of the monopoly of lawful violence once

¹ Pinker, S., *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, Viking Books, New York, 2011.

there has been a cognitive invention of a State. Nor are we spared hefty reflections on the benefits of education when it comes to fighting against prejudices of all kinds and violent behaviour as a whole. Growing sexual equality and the contrasting attitudes of the sexes towards direct violence are also taken into account, of course. How can one resist such a fine plethora of evidence? Finally we have something to cheer us up in our cruel, malicious world.

However, amongst all these fine statistical proofs, one little problem seems hard to eliminate: the twentieth century, its wars between states, its civil wars, its forgotten wars, its just wars and its central ignominy: the Shoah. Pinker is not obtuse. He hesitates. But in the end he comes down on one side: the holocaust is an aberrant, exceptional and unpredictable phenomenon that is ultimately without significance. No luck for the twentieth century and those who lived in it, but one mustn't lose sight of the wider point of view, the overall picture. This odd case doesn't put the overwhelming tendency into question, you just have to make sure you don't lose your nerve.

Pinker's reasoning is diametrically opposed to that of Nassim Nicholas Taleb whose 2007 book *The Black Swan* met a powerful echo with the 2008 economic crisis.² The book was not about the exploits of anorexic, split-personality, suicidal dancers, but rather cases that lie at the extremities of statistical bell curves. Extreme cases, noted the author, are swept aside in the calculus because the likelihood of occurrence is low. However, they do wind up occurring, and with devastating effects. The collapse of the stock markets in the aftermath of the sub-prime crisis was a demonstration in reality of the scope of Taleb's warning: never forget the "black swans" in the series that looks to be heading in the right direction. This kind of event only ever happens to the others. At the time, the enthusiastic economists gathered around Greenspan at the US Federal Reserve were forever rejoicing at the lengthy period of growth the world economy was enjoying. They came round to saying that the economy had finally succeeded in squaring the circle: crisis-free capitalism was possible.

Behind it was the ever-greater productivity guaranteed by developments in electronics and ICT (Information and Communications Technology) in general. We enjoyed the good times that had no reason to fade. Alas, the unforeseen has now occurred, and since then we have been debating in a field laid to waste by the biggest crisis since the nineteen-thirties and there is still no end in sight. Therefore, Pinker's message is all the more remarkable. Why bother "thinking through Auschwitz"?³ Why bother wondering about the imperiousness of the "sacrifice to dark gods"?⁴ Why bother reflecting on the orgy of nihilism produced by the totalitarian and despotic system, *hostis humani generis*, of Nazism?

2 Taleb, N. N., *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, Random House, New York, 2008.

3 Cf. Trigano, S. (ed.), *Penser Auschwitz*, Special Edition of *Pardès*, 9-10, 1989.

4 Cf. Lacan, J., *The Seminar, Book XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, transl. by A. Sheridan, Penguin, 1994, p. 274.

We have nothing to learn
on lawful violence goes
population, as the ong
reminding us. Thanks to
about one thing: the decl
civilisation and its lie, it is
perchance to dream. Pi
spirit. He may well have
cortical activity, but he is
with us is also a feature
[...]

Originally published

a State. Nor are we spared hefty
when it comes to fighting against
as a whole. Growing sexual equality
wards direct violence are also taken
t such a fine plethora of evidence
our cruel, malicious world.
al proofs, one little problem seems
wars between states, its civil wars
tral ignominy: the Shoah. Pinker is
he comes down on one side: the
unpredictable phenomenon that is
he twentieth century and those who
der point of view, the overall picture
endency into question, you just have

sed to that of Nassim Nicholas Taleb
verful echo with the 2008 economic
f anorexic, split-personality, suicidal
extremities of statistical bell curves
t aside in the calculus because the
hey do wind up occurring, and with
ck markets in the aftermath of the
ality of the scope of Taleb's warning
that looks to be heading in the right
pens to the others. At the time, the
reenspan at the US Federal Reserve
of growth the world economy was
e economy had finally succeeded in
as possible.

ivity guaranteed by developments in
(communications Technology) in general
on to fade. Alas, the unforeseen has
n debating in a field laid to waste by
s and there is still no end in sight
e remarkable. Why bother "thinking
ng about the imperiousness of the
ing on the orgy of nihilism produced
tis *humani generis*, of Nazism?

Improbable, Random House, New York, 2008
of *Pardès*, 9-10, 1989.
Mental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, trans. by

We have nothing to learn from what happens when the State and its monopoly on lawful violence goes crazy and wages imperial wars or massacres its population, as the ongoing Khmer Rouge case trials in Phnom Penh are reminding us. Thanks to evolutionary psychology, we can at least be optimistic about one thing: the decline of violence. The twentieth century is not the truth of civilisation and its lie, it is a statistical aberration. We can go on sleeping soundly, perchance to dream. Pinker is one of the more optimistic heirs to the sixties spirit. He may well have lived through the harsh realities of fMRI images of cortical activity, but he is still a bit of a poet. The good news he is keen to share with us is also a feature of his discipline: evolutionary psychology.

[...]

Translated from the French by Adrian Price

Originally published in *Lacan Quotidien*, No. 106, 4 December 2011, pp. 2-3

HURLY- BURLY

ISSUE 7
MAY 2012

		Special Dossier – Autism and Psychoanalysis	
		• Psychoanalytic Institute for the Child	Autism and Psychoanalysis: Our Convictions 165
	9	• Jean-Claude Maleval	Listen to the Autists! 171
		• Silvia Tendlarz	Autistic Children 193
	17	• Marie-Hélène Issartel	A Tightrope Walker's Practice 201
	23	• Monique Delius	Learning to Speak? 207
Between Symptom	31	• Stéphane Vallade	Leo's Machine 213
	41	• Gracia Viscasillas	"What Am I Going to Do Now" 217
	51	• Sonia Chiriaco	"Compare Him Only To Himself" 221
		• Éric Laurent	The Autist's Trait 223
		The letter! The litter! And the soother the bitter!	
		• Monique Kusnierek	Words and Numbers 229
		• Daniel Pasqualin	Autism's Rosetta Stone? 233
		• Éric Laurent	The Discoveries of Evolutionary Psychology 235
		• Éric Laurent	The Entanglements of Narcissism 239
		Hypermodern Times	
		• D. W. Winnicott	Behaviour Therapy 245
		• Roger Litten	The English Model 249
		• Gérard Wajcman	Anatomical Art 255
		• Jacques-Alain Miller	Three Articles from the French News Weekly <i>Le Point</i> 261