

Editorial
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The letter! The litter! And the soother the bitther!
Hypermodern Times

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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 To this are added calculations, extrapolated from historical documents in conformity with conventional rules, showing that the homicide rate in England is now a hundredth of what it was around 1400.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.

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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

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