

Book review

The Better Angels of Our Nature Why violence has declined

Steven Pinker

I cannot remember when I last read such an impressive book, but certainly not this century. It is a *tour de force*, accomplished in language and scholarship, integrating insights equally from history, anthropology, psychology, neuroscience and philosophy. It challenges and refutes fashionable pessimism and preconceptions. Its radical assertions are backed up by countless graphs and meticulous explanations of the statistics. The material on ethics and moralities held out new angles even for myself, despite having studied this field some forty years.

As the subtitle says, the thread uniting this wide-ranging survey is how the threat of immediate violence has declined over the millenia and centuries from being an often daily occurrence in most people's lives to being a marginal concern for the majority, largely confined in the civilised world to depiction in mass media and otherwise news reports from far away. But it is also very much a book about civilisation and civil society, about the advent of culture and literacy, the ascendancy of the notion of human rights, and even rising levels of intelligence. It is also, for the sceptical, a lesson in numeracy.

It is supremely well-written, replete with pithy formulations to hammer the message home so that even

the drier, statistical and neurological sections can be a delight to read. It is interlaced with humour. The vocabulary is as rich and varied as it gets: I was glad to have the New Oxford American Dictionary a click away on the Kindle version. Steven Pinker moves, often in the selfsame sentence, effortlessly from the vernacular (including words considered taboo) to the most sophisticated and precise scientific terminology. Yet his use of language is never pretentious, always appropriate to the message. I shall be looking at how his German translator – Sebastian Vogel – has tackled this Herculean task:

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Gewalt: Eine neue Geschichte der Menschheit
Aus dem Amerikanischen von Sebastian Vogel
S. Fischer

Many of the ideas will be broadly familiar to anyone who has followed reports in the popular scientific press (for example, *New Scientist*) or in the relevant academic journals. But here they are assembled in one place, marshalled comprehensively and critically with all the references. To an extent, the book says what many of us must have long realised intuitively. Reasoned, it has the ring of truth. It is balanced, and understands well that there is perennially in well-considered contexts the need for the threat of violence, notwithstanding the proper invective against. It is, finally, a sorely needed and robust defence of the values of the Enlightenment.

Alle Achtung!

Cousin Cusanus