

The Decline of Violence is Surely a Good Thing

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Abstract: Despite the widespread belief that the world grows increasingly violent, Steven Pinker's 2011 volume *The Better Angels of Our Nature* convincingly argues that the opposite is true. Tracing the history of humanity from its origins to the present day, Pinker shows how violence has declined, and that strong, stable government is the principal reason for this happening. The book briefly touches on the way literature may play a part in the reduction of violence through the transmission of empathy – the way in which stories about other people, even fictional people, teach us to comprehend more closely our fellow human beings. This article expands on Pinker's assertion and suggests that violence has also declined in literature, or become increasingly unacceptable to the point of rejection.

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“Believe it or not – and I know that most people do not – violence has declined over long stretches of time, and today we may be living in the most peaceable era in our species’ existence” (Pinker xxi). Thus begins Steven Pinker’s massive 2011 study of declining violence. As Pinker predicted, many people objected to it, including Andrew Brown in *The Guardian* who, despite confessing to not having read the whole book, condemned it as “a comfort blanket for the smug.” Timothy Snyder, in *Foreign Affairs* takes exception to Pinker’s assumption that violence should be perceived relatively rather than absolutely:

Yet even if Pinker is right that the ratio of violent to peaceful deaths has improved over time (and he probably is), his metric of progress deserves a bit more attention than he gives it. His argument about decreasing violence is a relative one: not that more people were killed annually in the past than are killed in a given year of recent history but that more people were killed relative to the size of the overall human population, which is of course vastly larger today than in earlier eras. But ask yourself: Is it preferable for ten people in a group of 1,000 to die violent deaths or for ten million in a group of one billion? For Pinker, the two scenarios are exactly the same, since in both, an individual person has a 99 percent chance of dying

peacefully. Yet in making a moral estimate about the two outcomes, one might also consider the extinction of more individual lives, one after another, and the grief of more families of mourners, one after another.

Snyder is a Professor of History at Yale University, and undoubtedly an intelligent man, but I find his argument less convincing than Pinker's. He suggests that simple numbers, rather than percentages, might have a greater significance, since in real terms, more people die, and more people suffer collaterally. But where does this argument end? To be absurdly reductive, does Snyder's argument still apply if, instead of *ten million in a group of one billion* it was ten thousand in a group of one billion? Or two thousand? The extinction of individual lives is still greater. But anyway, Snyder seriously misrepresents Pinker's argument. The latter's point is that both scenarios do *not* have an equal *99 percent chance of dying peacefully*; in the scenario set in the distant past the percentage of people dying peacefully would have been much lower, in the present, much higher.

Perhaps one of the reasons so many people are affronted by the idea that violence is historically decreasing is a continuing belief in the Rousseauian idea of the Noble Savage. From the Enlightenment onwards, there has been a tendency to use, generally for political purposes, the concept of an age of innocence, now lost in the mists of time, as a means of criticising centralised government and the rise of capitalism. Aphra Behn's poem "The Golden Age," set in a time in which "no rough sounds of wars alarms / Had taught the world the needless use of arms" (2) is a good example; indeed, the myth of the Golden Age is dealt with at length by Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City*, in which he describes the golden age myth as the "well-known habit of using the past, the 'good old days', as a stick to beat the present" (12). But Rousseau has always had his supporters. In the nineteenth century, the anarchist Prince Petr Kropotkin wrote that

It is evident that it would be quite contrary to all that we know of nature if men were an exception to so general a rule [of peace and mutual support]: if a creature so defenceless as man was at his beginnings should have found his protection and his way to progress, not in mutual support, like other animals, but in a reckless competition for personal advantages, with no regard to the interest of the species. To a mind accustomed to the idea of unity in nature, such a proposition appears utterly indefensible (74).

This appeal to nature (a sure sign that it is groundless), had become one of postcolonial guilt by the twentieth century:

A modern concern with the dignity and rights of all peoples inhibits us from speaking too frankly about rates of violence in preliterate peoples and the "anthropologists of peace" have worked to give them a Rousseauian image makeover (Pinker 43).

The mid-twentieth century anthropologist, Lucy Mair, for example, who carried out research into the Sudanese Dinka tribes, reported that when

fight broke out [...] only clubs were used. If a man was killed by someone belonging to another tribe, it was his kinsman's duty to seek

vengeance. But it was thought right that between members of the same tribe redress for injuries should be sought by the peaceful process of mediation and the payment of compensation” (48).

While of the neighbouring Anuak people she explains that

[t]he idea that revenge for killing could be pursued within the limits of so small a community as an Anuak village is as unthinkable there as anywhere else, but the Anuak way of preventing this is for the killer and his kin to leave the village till the anger of his victims has had time to cool” (49).

Among the *anthropologists of peace* specifically mentioned by Pinker is Margaret Mead, who described warfare in Samoa as “stylized as part of the inter-relationship between villages that were ceremonial rivals, and occasioned few casualties” (360-1). This is precisely the kind of warfare that Pinker considers to be underestimated. Basing his comments on recent research he argues that:

[t]he actual death counts from primitive warfare show that the apparent harmlessness of a single battle is deceptive. For one thing, a skirmish may escalate into an all-out combat that leaves the battlefield strewn with bodies. Also, when bands of a few dozen men confront each other on a regular basis, even one or two deaths per battle can add up to a rate of casualties that is high by any standard (43)

Lawrence H. Keeley, an archaeologist, was one of the first scholars to overturn the prevalent academic belief that primitive societies were peaceful. In *War before Civilization* he concluded that high death rates in non-state societies were due to:

the prevalence of wars, the high proportion of tribesmen who face combat, the cumulative effects of frequent but low-casualty battles, the unmitigated deadliness and very high frequency of raids, the catastrophic mortalities inflicted in general massacres, the customary killing of all adult males, and the often atrocious treatment of women and children. For these reasons, a member of a typical tribal society, especially a male, had a far higher probability of dying “by the sword” than a citizen of an average modern state (93).

Having exploded the myth of peaceful primitive societies, Pinker summarises a number of other factors that he considers do not contribute to violence, despite popular beliefs to the contrary. Firstly, he argues that “it’s hard to find a correlation over history between the destructive power of weaponry and the human toll of deadly quarrels” (673) adding that access to arms has not pushed the murder rate in the northern states of the USA, despite the availability of firearms, much higher than that of Europe, while it is significantly higher in the southern states (94).

Secondly, he claims that wars are not fought over resources but ideology: “The most destructive eruptions of the past half millennium were fuelled not by resources but by ideologies” (674). The war against Iraq provides an interesting example. At the time it seemed clear that the attack on Saddam Hussein was to ensure access and control over

the country's oil, particularly for the benefit of American oil companies, yet this no longer seems to be the case. Despite the auction of production rights to a number of major international oil companies, "rising tensions between Shia, Kurdish and Sunni factions in Iraq since the US withdrawal do not bode well for a boost in oil production" (*Guardian*, February 2012). As Pinker puts it: "the costs of war have to be subtracted from the value of the plundered materials" (675) yet post-Iraq, oil prices have risen and production, in Iraq at least, has dropped. Surely a reliance on trade, rather than war, would have been more beneficial all round. Why, then, was the war fought? Much of the Arab world saw it as a continuation of the centuries-old struggle between Christianity and Islam, while Western commentators saw it as George W. Bush avenging his father's failure to defeat Saddam Hussein in the First Gulf War (which was actually the second, the first being the Iraq-Iran War of 1980-88) – "George Bush's war of revenge against Iraq" as Andrew Murray described it in *The Guardian* in 2002.

Thirdly, Pinker argues that violence is not related to poverty: "tight correlations between affluence and non-violence are hard to find" (675) while the "careenings of the American homicide rate in the 20th century were largely uncorrelated with measures of prosperity" (675-6). In fact, violence and war in the modern age are fought largely for reasons that actually appear quite primitive. Pinker's conclusion is that "a lot of our violence comes from destructive ideologies rather than not enough wealth. For better or worse – usually worse – people are often willing to trade off material comfort for what they see as spiritual purity, communal glory, or perfect justice.

But still, violence is historically decreasing. Pinker considers Thomas Hobbes essential to our understanding of how, above all, the establishment of centralised state control led to an increase in peace and safety:

In every act of violence, there are three interested parties: the aggressor, the victim, and a bystander. Each has a motive for violence: the aggressor to prey upon the victim, the victim to retaliate, the bystander to minimize collateral damage from their fight. Violence between the combatants may be called war; violence by the bystander against the combatants may be called law. The Leviathan theory, in a nutshell, is that law is better than war (35).

Apart from state control, which is "the most consistent violence-reducer" (Pinker 680), commerce, feminisation, the use of reason and increased empathy are also contributory factors. The last of these, empathy, is of particular interest to the Humanities because it was, argues Pinker, initially related to book reading and the rise of the novel:

Around the same time that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* mobilized abolitionist sentiment in the United States, Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838) and *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839) opened people's eyes to the mistreatment of children in British workhouses and orphanages, and Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast: A Personal Narrative of Life at Sea* (1840) and Herman Melville's *White Jacket* helped end the flogging of sailors. In the past century Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, George Orwell's *1984*, Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, Aleksander Solzhenitsyn's *One day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Elie Wiesel's *Night*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-*

Five, Alex Haley's *Roots*, Anchee Min's *Red Azalea*, Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, and Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (a novel that features genital mutilation) all raised public awareness of the suffering of people who might otherwise have been ignored. Cinema and television reached even larger audiences and offered experiences that were even more immediate (177).

There is evidence that exposure to other people's point of view increases sympathy for them. This is not merely intuitive but has been demonstrated by anthropological study. The ethnographer Gillian Evans carried out fieldwork into relations between black and white youths in Bermondsey, in the London borough of Southwark. As expected, the young white men are abusively racist in their attitude to the non-white people living in their area but then, to her surprise, her interlocutors suddenly greet with warmth and respect a young black man who passes by. They explain that the black man is all right because they know him, and to illustrate what they mean they suggest that Evans watch the film *American History X* in which a black and a white man, initially enemies, become friends. Evans reports that:

[w]atching *American History X* confirmed what I have come to understand through my own fieldwork: that getting to know people is all about learning how to enter into meaningful exchange relations with them. Whether mediated or unmediated, exchange relations are always the form that participation takes. What makes those relations meaningful is the potential for the creation and transformation of value between persons and things. It is our capacity for the development of empathy that is the basis of an on-going inter-subjective, situational appraisal, which is what the evaluation of worth depends upon (252).

What is interesting for Pinker, however, is not only that meeting and getting to know people you would most likely initially dislike – people different from yourself, for example – that promotes empathy, but that “listening to his story while taking his perspective can genuinely expand [your] sympathy for him and for the group he represents, and not just during the few minutes after hearing the story” (588). It is the story telling which is decisive to the expansion of empathy. But does this empathy then extend to others of the same initially disliked group? And can the story-telling of literature have the same effect? “Do readers sympathize just with Uncle Tom or with all African American slaves? With *Oliver Twist* or with orphaned children in general? With *Anne Frank* or with all victims of the Holocaust?” (Pinker 586). In other words, “[c]ould fiction be a stealthy way to expand people's sympathy?” (589).

The idea that literature has something virtuous about it, that it makes you a better person, has long fascinated literary critics. Aristotle claimed that “poetry is something more philosophical and more worthy of serious attention than history; for while poetry is concerned with universal truths, history treats of individual facts” (43-44) and Horace advised writers to “blend profit with delight” in order to give pleasure along with instruction (91). A thousand or two years later little had changed. The nineteenth century poet and critic Matthew Arnold argued that the pursuit of culture “reminds us that the perfection of human nature is sweetness and light” (69), while Leavis, in reference to the “great English novelists [–] are all distinguished by a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity” (18).

Terry Eagleton, in line with contemporary literary critical thought, disagrees:

The strength of Leavisian criticism was that it was able to provide an answer [...] to the question, why read Literature? The answer, in a nutshell, was that it made you a better person. Few reasons could have been more persuasive than that. When the Allied troops moved into the concentration camps some years after the founding of Scrutiny, to arrest commandants who had whiled away their leisure hours with a volume of Goethe, it appeared that someone had some explaining to do (30).

Eagleton's dismissal of the Leavisian argument by reference to the Nazi concentration camps is surprisingly heavy-handed – perhaps in the knowledge that his orthodoxy is less universal than he would like to suggest. Indeed, it may be an opinion confined to literary critics:

Today the historian Lynn Hurst, the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, and the psychologists Raymond Mar and Keith Oatley, among others, have championed the reading of fiction as an empathy expander and a force toward humanitarian progress. One might think that literary scholars would line up to join them, eager to show that their subject matter is a force for progress in an era in which students and funding are staying away in droves. But many literary scholars [...] bristle at the suggestion that reading fiction can be morally uplifting (Pinker 588-9).

If Pinker and the other experts that he mentions believe that reading fiction expands empathy, then – and this is the question a cynical academic of literature would instantly ask – would it not depend on the kind of literature read? Leavis's highly moral great English novelists might be all very well, but what if it was a novel of a particularly bloody and gruesome kind? Pinker acknowledges that popular culture in a broad sense appears to be getting more violent:

Many of the popular musicians in recent genres such as punk, metal, goth, grunge, gangsta, and hip-hop make the Rolling Stones look like the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Hollywood movies are bloodier than ever, unlimited pornography is a mouse-click away, and an entirely new form of violent entertainment, video games, has become a major pastime. Yet as these signs of decadence proliferated in the culture, violence went down in real life (128).

However, the explanation for this is that people have simply become more sophisticated and are able to reflect consciously on those forms of social behaviour which are justifiably condemned and those which are not. Our society has become so safe that we can afford to break certain conventions and defy taboos secure in the knowledge that we will not be attacked for doing so. Just as an individual may now openly discuss his or her religious beliefs without fearing the attentions of the Holy Inquisition, he or she may also wear outrageous clothing, or virtually none, or swear, without concern for their safety (128). However, such an ability to distinguish between what is acceptable and what is not – and more importantly, to be able to register changes in acceptability – does not explain why there should be an interest in representations of violence at all. If real

violence has decreased, why should there be an interest in its portrayal? According to Pinker “[a] likely explanation is that in evolutionary history, violence was not so improbable that people could afford not to understand how it works” (485). In other words, an interest in violence has been hard-wired into us as a means of improving our chances of survival in a dangerous world.

It is no surprise then that a brief reflection on the history of the written word reveals that there was plenty of violence in the literary past as the following passage from the Bible about the multiple rape and death of a young woman demonstrates:

22 *Now* as they were making their hearts merry, behold, the men of the city, certain sons of Belial, beset the house round about, *and* beat at the door, and spake to the master of the house, the old man, saying, Bring forth the man that came into thine house, that we may know him. 23 And the man, the master of the house, went out unto them, and said unto them, Nay, my brethren, *nay*, I pray you, do not *so* wickedly; seeing that this man is come into mine house, do not this folly. 24 Behold, *here is* my daughter a maiden, and his concubine; them I will bring out now, and humble ye them, and do with them what seemeth good unto you: but unto this man do not so vile a thing. 25 But the men would not hearken to him: so the man took his concubine, and brought her forth unto them; and they knew her, and abused her all the night until the morning: and when the day began to spring, they let her go. 26 Then came the woman in the dawning of the day, and fell down at the door of the man’s house where her lord *was*, till it was light. 27 And her lord rose up in the morning, and opened the doors of the house, and went out to go his way: and, behold, the woman his concubine was fallen down *at* the door of the house, and her hands *were* upon the threshold. 28 And he said unto her, Up, and let us be going. But none answered. Then the man took her *up* upon an ass, and the man rose up, and gat him unto his place. 29 And when he was come into his house, he took a knife, and laid hold on his concubine, and divided her, *together* with her bones, into twelve pieces, and sent her into all the coasts of Israel. Judges 19: 22-29. King James Authorised Version.

A moment’s thought will also remind us that Homer, Sophocles, Shakespeare (think of Oedipus and Lear putting out their eyes) and the Marquis de Sade were as horrific as anything produced today. Indeed, quite possibly more so: I would like to argue that despite appearances to the contrary, even representations of extreme violence are becoming less acceptable than they were – and not by government decree, but through a change in what society finds palatable.

Among the many ways in which Pinker demonstrates how violence has decreased over the centuries is the treatment of children:

Since 1950, people have become increasingly loath to allow children to become the victims of any kind of violence. The violence people can most easily control, of course, is the violence they inflict themselves, namely by spanking, smacking, slapping, paddling, birching, tanning, hiding, thrashing, and other forms of corporal punishment. Elite opinion on corporal punishment changed dramatically during the 20th century. Other

than in fundamentalist Christian groups, it's rare today to hear people say that sparing the rod will spoil the child (435).

This is clearly reflected in the Australian novel *The Slap*, a novel which was so successful it spawned an internationally broadcast television series of the same name. The premise of the novel is simple: at a suburban barbecue in Melbourne a man publicly slaps someone else's extremely badly behaved boy:

'No!' The same piercing scream. The boy looked as if he were going to hit his father with the bat.

'Put the bat down now.'

The boy did not move.

'Now!'

There was silence. Hector realised that he was holding his breath.

'You're out, Hugo, you bloody spoil-sport.' Rocco, at the end of his tether, went to grab the bat from the younger boy. With another scream Hugo evaded the older boy's hands, and then, leaning back, he lifted the bat. Hector froze. He's going to hit him. He's going to belt Rocco with that bat.

In the second that it took Hector to release his breath, he saw Ravi jumping towards the boys, he heard Gary's furious curse and he saw Harry push past all of them and grab at Hugo. He lifted the boy up in the air, and in shock the boy dropped the bat.

'Let me go,' Hugo roared.

Harry set him on the ground. The boy's face had gone dark with fury. He raised his foot and kicked wildly into Harry's shin. The speed was coursing through Hector's blood, the hairs on his neck were upright. He saw his cousin's raised arm, it spliced the air, and then he saw the open palm descend and strike the boy. The slap seemed to echo. It cracked the twilight. The little boy looked up at the man in shock. There was a long silence. It was as if he could not comprehend what had just occurred, how the man's action and the pain he was beginning to feel coincided. The silence broke, the boy's face crumpled, and this time there was no wail: when the tears began to fall, they fell silently.

'You fucking animal!' Gary pushed into Harry and nearly knocked him over. There was a scream and Rosie pushed past the men and scooped her child into her arms (40-1).

Many, if not most readers of the novel sympathise, at least in part, with Harry; in similar circumstances they know they too would have liked to slap the revolting Hugo. But they also know they probably wouldn't, and they also most likely believe that hitting children is wrong and inexcusable. Compare this incident with the infamous scene in *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1856) in which the eponymous Tom is tortured by the bully Flashman:

"Very well then, let's roast him," cried Flashman, and catches hold of Tom by the collar; one or two boys hesitate, but the rest join in. East seizes Tom's arm and tries to pull him away, but is knocked back by one of the boys and Tom is dragged along, struggling. His shoulders are

pushed against the mantelpiece, and he is held by main force before the fire, Flashman drawing his trousers tight by way of extra torture (156).

Tom's plight excites the sympathy of the school, but nothing is done to punish his tormentors, particularly Flashman who "toadied himself back into favour again" (159). Flashman, who is seventeen at the time of the attack on the much younger Tom, is old enough both to know better, but not so old to be held to account for his misdeeds. But how about Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and the imprisonment of the young Jane at Gateshead by her aunt? Imprisoned in the room where her uncle died she becomes distraught and cries out desperately to be released:

Mrs Reed, impatient of my now frantic anguish and wild sobs, abruptly thrust me back and locked me in, without further parley. I heard her sweeping away; and soon after she was gone, I suppose I had a species of fit: unconsciousness closed the scene (50).

Many such scenes of childhood beatings and torture may be found in the novels of the nineteenth century: Dickens's *Oliver Twist* immediately springs to mind in which barely has the novel begun before the tiny lad is set to pick oakum and, being hungry, notoriously asks for more gruel, at which "[t]he master aimed a blow at Oliver's head with the ladle, pinioned him in his arms, and shrieked aloud for the beadle" (24). One would like to see the master try the same thing at a barbecue in twenty-first century Melbourne and see where it gets him.

This is not to say that horrific cruelty to children does not occur in contemporary novels, as the following passage from Don Winslow's *magnum opus The Power of the Dog* demonstrates. Published in 2005, the novel describes in violent detail the Mexican drug wars of the final quarter of the twentieth century, including the murder of two children:

Fabián throws the girl off the bridge. Her hair lofts up like futile wings and she plummets as Fabián grabs the little boy and in one easy swing tosses him over the railing.

Adán forces himself to look.

The children's bodies plunge seven hundred feet, then smash onto the rocks below.

Then he looks back at the Orejuela brothers, whose faces are white with shock. Gilberto's hand shakes as he shuts the suitcase, picks it up and walks shakily back across the bridge.

Below, the Río Magdalena washes away the bodies and the blood (296).

This act of unbelievable violence against children is quite different from that depicted in Victorian novels. Firstly, it is very brief, but secondly, and most importantly, it is included in the novel precisely for its exceptionality. Winslow's self-appointed task is to describe and condemn the horrors of the Mexican narco war and the United States war on drugs, but not because such horrors have become established as normal practice. Quite the opposite – the drug wars are a concatenation of factors that have led to unbelievable and unusual horrors that few would believe possible. Dickens, on the other

hand, describes events that have become acceptable through their very familiarity and for this reason require exposure.

A number of other writers of contemporary fiction are also quite extraordinarily violent in their work – very often for similar reasons to Don Winslow. South African crime writers such as Deon Meyer, Mike Nichol and Roger Smith depict in some detail the horror of everyday life for many of their compatriots. However, I would suggest that, like Dickens, their work reflects the violence of the societies they are writing about and, crucially, that such violence is becoming increasingly infrequent, or confined to specific and increasingly fewer regions of the world. Most of Don Winslow's novels, for example, do not take place in Mexico, or South America, but in the United States, and although he is a crime novelist, violence is rarely described in graphic detail. Most contemporary fiction, including cinema is, in fact, relatively violence free. This is clearly illustrated by the public and critical reaction to works which are unacceptably or unusually violent. Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*, which are bloody rather than specifically violent, were precisely celebrated for their strangeness and peculiarity while – more pertinently, Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* was almost universally condemned. *American Psycho* is an excellent example of a novel which, for most people, goes too far in its explicit and detailed descriptions of torture and mutilation. Like Tarantino's films, *American Psycho* has not led to countless popular imitations and copies. The kind of sadistic horror portrayed in the novel has remained underground as though having popped its head up once in the form of critically-acclaimed postmodern literature, it has realised that its day has not yet arrived, and has returned to its subterranean lair.

Contrary to popular belief, most people are not titillated by explicit violence but react with moral outrage if they consider that a work has overstepped the mark, especially if it belongs to a genre which has a broad public appeal. The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, in his volume *Violence*, argues that such moral outrage plays directly into the hands of the enemies of progressive struggle. What Pinker sees as empathy, Žižek sees as collaboration with those in power. For Pinker it is always better to have someone in power, for Žižek it is not, since their only objective is the exploitation of the masses. He argues that it is

[b]etter to do nothing than engage in localised acts the ultimate function of which is to make the system run more smoothly (acts such as providing space for the multitude of new subjectivities). The threat today is not passivity, but pseudo-activity, the urge to be 'active', to 'participate', to mask the nothingness of what goes on (183).

It is undoubtedly true that all too often the kind of participation encouraged by the political authorities is a smokescreen, empty of meaning beyond that of pacifying the would-be socially active and aware. Nevertheless, *providing space for the multitude of new sensitivities* sounds suspiciously like the promotion of empathy, a means by which violence may be reduced as we understand and sympathise with the plight and experiences of those unlike ourselves. In an apparent rejection of empathy Žižek argues that

to chastise violence outright, to condemn it as 'bad', is an ideological operation par excellence, a mystification which collaborates in rendering invisible the fundamental forms of social violence (174).

And he concludes *Violence* with the outrageous assertion that

[i]f one means by violence a radical upheaval of the basic social relations, then crazy and tasteless as it may sound, the problem with historical monsters who slaughtered millions was that they were not violent enough (183).

According to Žižek, the promotion of understanding between people and the condemnation of violence are simply ideological operations which render "invisible the fundamental forms of social violence" (174). "Why," he asks "are so many problems today perceived as problems of intolerance, rather than problems of inequality, exploitation or injustice?" (119). Indeed, as far as Žižek is concerned, tolerance is one of many mechanisms "destined to render us insensitive to the most brutal forms of violence" (174). Tolerance (a consequence, perhaps, of empathy), is merely the acceptance that nothing can be changed; that there can be no progress. Presumably Žižek agrees with Robert A. Heinlein's high school teacher in *Starship Troopers*, who tells his class that "[v]iolence, naked force, has settled more issues in history than has any other factor" (Heinlein 27); if you wish to change the world then you must - literally - fight for it. Heinlein's lesson in his Cold War analogy is that the enemy - who is unquestionably and intolerably 'other', must be utterly wiped out.

But Pinker is clear throughout *The Better Angels of our Nature*, that Hobbes's vision was always contentious - that deferring to a strong and stable government must always be accompanied by the struggle to avoid tyranny. It is difficult not to sympathise with Pinker who, after all, has statistics on his side. The world has become less violent and has achieved this, above all, through submission to those in power. Žižek finds this unacceptable and claims to prefer unimaginable violence to the perpetuation of our current inegalitarian regime. Perhaps we have been tamed, perhaps our distaste for violence not only in its horrific reality, but in its representations on the page and screen, are indications of our pusillanimity. Žižek's stance is unquestionably ideological - of the kind abhorred by Pinker for its terrible consequences - yet strangely Žižek's very last words in his book are "[s]ometimes, doing nothing is the most violent thing to do" (183).

We are left with an odd dichotomy - that of two intellectuals, one preaching peace, and the other violence. The former condemned for his enlightened disavowal of fashionable cynicism, the latter celebrated for his Romantic, rebellious and contradictory spirit. Žižek, it seems to me, is something of a trickster - a charlatan even. At the beginning of *Violence* he argues that he cannot directly confront his theme, that he must look at it "awry" (3). The dispassionate alternative - that explored by Pinker in *The Better Angels of our Nature* - both ignores "its traumatic impact" (3) while somehow reproducing and participating in its horror (3). It is not easy to understand what Žižek is saying, and this would seem to be his intention. Pinker, on the other hand is clear, comprehensive and credible. I know whose world I prefer to live in.

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