

“[O]n top of all the benefits that modernity has brought us in health, experience, and knowledge, we can add its role in the reduction of violence.”

# Why the World Is More Peaceful

STEVEN PINKER

**B**elieve it or not—and most people do not—violence has declined historically, and we may be living today in the most peaceable era in our species's existence. This decline in violence has certainly not been smooth, nor is it guaranteed to continue. But it is an unmistakable and empirically demonstrable development.

No aspect of life is untouched by humans' retreat from violence. Daily existence is very different if you always have to worry about being abducted, raped, or killed. And it is hard to develop sophisticated arts, learning, or commerce if the institutions that support them are looted and burned as quickly as they are built.

The historical trajectory of violence affects not only how life is lived but how it is understood. What could be more fundamental to our sense of meaning and purpose than a conception of whether the strivings of the human race over long stretches of time have left us better or worse off? How, in particular, are we to make sense of *modernity*—of the erosion of family, tribe, tradition, and religion by the forces of individualism, cosmopolitanism, reason, and science? So much depends on how we understand the legacy of this transition: whether we see our world as a nightmare of crime, terrorism, genocide, and war, or as a period that, by the standards of history, is blessed by unprecedented levels of peaceful coexistence.

The question of whether the arithmetic sign of trends in violence is positive or negative also bears on our conception of human nature. Although theories of human nature rooted in biology are often associated with fatalism about violence, and the theory that the mind is a blank slate is associated with progress, in my view it is the other way around. How are we to understand the natural state of life when our species first emerged

and the processes of history began? The belief that violence has increased suggests that the world we made has contaminated us, perhaps irretrievably. The belief that it has decreased suggests that we started off nasty and that the artifices of civilization have moved us in a noble direction, one in which we can hope to continue.

## RISING STANDARDS

The very idea that violence has gone down over the course of history invites incredulity. The human mind tends to estimate the probability of an event from the ease with which it can recall examples—and scenes of carnage in contemporary media are ubiquitous.

Also, a large swath of our intellectual culture is loath to admit that there could be anything good about civilization, modernity, and Western society. Yet perhaps the main cause of the illusion of ever-present violence springs from one of the forces that drove violence down in the first place. The decline of violent behavior has been paralleled by a decline in attitudes that tolerate or glorify violence, and often the attitudes are in the lead. By the standards of the mass atrocities of human history, the lethal injection of a murderer in Texas, or an occasional hate crime in which a member of an ethnic minority is intimidated by hooligans, is pretty mild stuff. But from a contemporary vantage point, we see them as signs of how low our behavior can sink, not of how high our standards have risen.

In fact, violence has diminished on many scales—in the family, in the neighborhood, between tribes and other armed factions, and among major nations and states. One can imagine a historical narrative in which different practices went in different directions: Slavery stayed abolished, for example, but parents decided to bring back savage beatings of their children; or states became increasingly humane to their citizens but more likely to wage war on one another. That has not happened. Most practices have moved in the less violent direction—too

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many to be a coincidence. Indeed, now is a good time in history to be a potential victim.

## POINTING PEACEWARD

The many developments that make up the human retreat from violence can be grouped into six major trends. The first, which took place on the scale of millennia, was the transition from the anarchy of the hunting, gathering, and horticultural societies in which our species spent most of its evolutionary history, to the first agricultural civilizations beginning around five thousand years ago. With that change came a reduction in the chronic raiding and feuding that characterized life in a state of nature. According to evidence from forensic archeology and ethnographic vital statistics, the change helped produce a more or less fivefold decrease in rates of violent death.

The second transition spanned more than half a millennium and is best documented in Europe. Between the late Middle Ages and the twentieth century, European countries saw a tenfold-to-fiftyfold decline in their rates of homicide. In his classic book *The Civilizing Process*, the sociologist Norbert Elias attributed this surprising decline to the consolidation of a patchwork of feudal territories into large kingdoms with centralized authority and an infrastructure of commerce.

The third transition unfolded on the scale of centuries and took off around the time of the Age of Reason and the European Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This “humanitarian revolution” saw the first organized movements to abolish socially sanctioned forms of violence such as absolute despotism, slavery, dueling, judicial torture, superstitious killing, sadistic punishment, and cruelty to animals, together with the first stirrings of systematic pacifism.

The fourth major transition took place after the end of World War II. The two-thirds of a century since then have witnessed a historically unprecedented development: The great powers, and developed states in general, have stopped waging war on one another. Historians have called this blessed state of affairs the “long peace.”

The fifth trend is also about armed combat but is more tenuous. Though it may be hard for news readers to believe, since the end of the cold war in 1989, organized conflicts of all kinds—civil wars, genocides, repression by autocratic governments, and terrorist attacks—have declined throughout the world.

Finally, the postwar era, symbolically inaugurated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, has seen a growing revulsion against aggression on smaller scales, including violence against ethnic minorities, women, children, homosexuals, and animals. These spinoffs from the concept of human rights—civil rights, women’s rights, children’s rights, gay rights, and animal rights—were asserted in a cascade of movements from the late 1950s to the present day.

To be sure, some developments have gone the other way: the destructiveness of European wars through World War II (overshadowing the decrease in wars’ frequency, until both destructiveness and frequency declined in tandem), the heyday of genocidal dictators in the middle decades of the twentieth century, the rise of crime in the 1960s, and the bulge of civil wars in the developing world following decolonization. Yet every one of these developments has been systematically reversed, and from where we sit on the time line, most trends point peaceward.

## CALMING EFFECTS

Human nature has always contained a capacity for violence, whether driven by predation, dominance, revenge, sadism, or ideology. But it also contains psychological faculties that inhibit violence, such as self-control, empathy, reason, and the moral sense—what Abraham Lincoln called the better angels of our nature. What has changed that has allowed our better angels to prevail?

The first pacifying force appears to be the *leviathan*, a state and judiciary with a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. By penalizing aggression, a state can defuse the temptation of exploitative attack, inhibit the impulse for revenge, and circumvent the self-serving biases that make all parties believe they are on the side of the angels. When bands, tribes, and chiefdoms came under the control of the first states, violent feuding and raids diminished dramatically. As fiefs coalesced into kingdoms and sovereign states, the consolidation of law enforcement sharply reduced homicide rates.

Pockets of anarchy that lay beyond the reach of government—the peripheral and mountainous backwaters of Europe, for example, and the frontiers of the American South and West—retained their violent cultures of honor. The same is true of pockets of anarchy in the socioeconomic landscape, such as lower classes that are deprived of consistent

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law enforcement and purveyors of contraband who cannot avail themselves of it. Inadequate or inept governance turns out to be among the biggest risk factors for civil war, and perhaps the principal asset that distinguishes violence-torn developing countries from the more peaceful developed world.

Importantly, the leviathan and rule of law do not rely on force alone. Thanks to the generalized effects of self-control that have been demonstrated in the psychology lab, refraining from aggression can become a habit, so civilized parties will inhibit their temptation to aggress even when the leviathan's back is turned. And occasionally the soft power of influential third parties or the threat of shaming and ostracism can have the same effect as police or armies.

This soft power is crucial in the international arena, where world government has always been a fantasy, but in which judgments by third parties, intermittently backed by sanctions or symbolic displays of force, can go a long way. The lowered risk of war when countries belong to international organizations or host international peacekeepers are two quantifiable examples of the pacifying effects of unarmed or lightly armed third parties.

A second factor contributing to the historical decline of violence is *commerce*, a positive-sum game in which everybody can win. As technological progress allows the exchange of goods and ideas over longer distances and among larger groups of trading partners, other people become more valuable alive than dead, and they are less likely to become targets of demonization and dehumanization.

The idea that an exchange of benefits can turn zero-sum warfare into mutual profit was one of the key ideas of the Enlightenment, and it was revived in modern biology as an explanation of how cooperation among nonrelatives evolved. Although commerce does not eliminate the disaster of being defeated in an attack, it reduces the adversary's incentive to attack (since he benefits from peaceful exchange too) and helps to take that worry off the table. And once people are enticed into voluntary exchange, they are encouraged to take each other's perspectives to clinch the best deal ("the customer is always right"), which in turn may lead them to respectful consideration of each other's interests, if not necessarily to warmth.

Beginning in the late Middle Ages, expanding kingdoms not only penalized plunder and nation-

alized justice but also supported an infrastructure of exchange, including money and the enforcement of contracts. This infrastructure—together with technological advances such as in roads and clocks, and the removal of taboos on interest, innovation, and competition—made commerce more attractive. As a result, merchants, craftsmen, and bureaucrats displaced knightly warriors, and violent death rates plunged.

Among larger entities such as cities and states, commerce was enhanced by oceangoing ships, new financial institutions, and a decline in mercantilist policies. These developments have been credited in part with the eighteenth-century domestication of warring imperial powers such as Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Spain into commercial states that made less trouble.

Two centuries later the transformation of China and Vietnam from authoritarian communist into authoritarian capitalist states was accompanied by a decreased willingness to indulge in the all-out ideological conflict that in preceding decades had made both countries the deadliest places on earth.

In other parts of the world as well, the tilting of values away from national glory and toward making money may have taken the wind out of the sails of cantankerous revanchist movements.

Careful statistical studies have demonstrated that countries that trade with each other are less likely to cross swords, holding all else constant, and countries that are more open to the world economy are less likely to host genocides and civil wars. Pulling in the other direction, governments that base their nations' wealth on digging oil, minerals, and diamonds out of the ground rather than adding value to it via commerce and trade are more likely to fall into civil wars.

## THE FEMALE FACTOR

A third force promoting the species's retreat from violence has been *feminization*—that is, a growing respect among cultures for the interests and values of women. Since violence is largely a male pastime, societies that empower women tend to move away from the glorification of violence and are less likely to breed dangerous subcultures of rootless young men.

From the time they are boys, males play more violently than females, fantasize more about violence, consume more violent entertainment, commit the lion's share of violent crimes, take more

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delight in punishment and revenge, take more foolish risks in aggressive attacks, vote for more warlike policies and leaders, and plan and carry out almost all the wars and genocides.

Female-friendly values may be expected to reduce violence because of the psychological legacy of the basic biological difference between the sexes, namely that males have more of an incentive to compete for sexual access to females, while females have more of an incentive to stay away from risks that would make their children orphans. Zero-sum competition, whether it takes the form of the contests for women in tribal and knightly societies or the contests for honor, status, dominance, and glory in modern ones, is more a man's obsession than a woman's.

Societies in which women get a better deal, both traditional and modern, tend to be societies that have less organized violence. This is obvious enough in tribes and chiefdoms that literally went to war to abduct women or avenge past abductions. But it can also be statistically verified among contemporary countries in the contrast between the low levels of political and judicial violence in the über-feminist democracies of Western Europe and the high levels in the genital-cutting, adulteress-stoning, burqa-cladding sharia states of Islamic Africa and Asia.

Feminization need not consist of women literally wielding more power in decisions on whether to go to war. It can also consist in a society moving away from a culture of manly honor, with its approval of violent retaliation for insults, toughening of boys through physical punishment, and veneration of martial glory.

Rates of violence correlate with an abundance of young males within population groups. At least two large studies have suggested that countries with a larger proportion of young men are more likely to fight interstate and civil wars. In the developing world, sclerotic economies cannot nimbly put a youth bulge to work. As a result, many unemployed or underemployed men with nothing to lose may find work and meaning in militias, warlord gangs, or terrorist cells.

But demographic trends are not immutable. A mass of evidence suggests that when women are given access to contraception and the freedom to marry on their own terms, they have fewer offspring than when the men of their societies force them to be baby factories. This means their countries' populations will be less distended by a thick slab of youth at the bottom with a greater tendency toward violence.

Women's empowerment often must proceed in the teeth of opposition from traditional men who want to preserve their control over female reproduction, and from religious institutions that oppose contraception and abortion. But worldwide polling data show that even in the most benighted countries there is considerable pent-up demand for such empowerment, and many international organizations are committed to hurrying it along. These are hopeful signs for further reductions in violence around the world.

## HEART AND HEAD

Fourth, forces of *cosmopolitanism*—such as literacy, mobility, and mass media—can prompt people to take the perspective of people unlike themselves and to expand their circle of sympathy to embrace them. Living in a more cosmopolitan society, one that puts us in contact with a diverse sample of other people and invites us to take their points of view, changes our emotional response to their well-being. A perfect fusion of the interests of every living human is an unattainable nirvana. But smaller increments in the valuation of other people's interests—say, a susceptibility to pangs of guilt when thinking about enslaving, torturing, or annihilating others—can shift the likelihood of aggressing against them.

Beginning in the seventeenth century, with technological advances in publishing and transportation, more people read books, including fiction that led them to inhabit the minds of other people, and satire that led them to question their society's norms. Vivid depictions of the suffering wrought by slavery, sadistic punishments, war, and cruelty to children and animals preceded the reforms that outlawed or reduced those practices. Chronology does not prove causation, but studies showing that hearing or reading a first-person narrative can enhance people's sympathy for the narrator at least make causation plausible.

Literacy, urbanization, mobility, and access to mass media continued their rise in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and in the second half of the twentieth century a global village began to emerge that made people even more aware of others unlike themselves. Just as the spread of reading helped kindle the humanitarian revolution of the eighteenth century, the global village and the electronic revolution may have aided the postwar long peace and the rights revolutions of the twentieth century. A number of studies have shown statistical links between the cosmopolitan mixing of peoples and the endorsement of humanistic values.

Finally, *reason*—the intensifying application of knowledge and rationality to human affairs—can force people to recognize the futility of cycles of violence, to ramp down the privileging of their own interests over others', and to reframe violence as a problem to be solved rather than a contest to be won. Whereas the expanding circle of sympathy involves occupying another person's vantage point and imagining his or her emotions as if they were one's own, the power of reason involves ascending to an Olympian, superrational vantage point—the perspective of eternity, the view from nowhere—and considering one's own interests and another person's as equivalent.

As humans honed the institutions of knowledge and reason, and purged superstitions and inconsistencies from their systems of belief, certain conclusions were bound to follow, just as when one masters the laws of arithmetic certain sums and products are bound to follow. And in many cases the conclusions are ones that led people to commit fewer acts of violence.

At various times in history superstitious killings, such as in human sacrifice, witch hunts, blood libels, inquisitions, and ethnic scapegoating, fell away as the factual assumptions on which they rested crumbled under the scrutiny of a more intellectually sophisticated populace. Carefully reasoned briefs against slavery, despotism, torture, religious persecution, cruelty to animals, harshness to children, violence against women, frivolous wars, and the persecution of homosexuals were not just hot air but entered into the decisions of the institutions and people who attended to the arguments and implemented reforms.

Of course it is not always easy to distinguish empathy from reason, the heart from the head. But the limited reach of empathy, with its affinity for people like us and people close to us, suggests that empathy needs the universalizing boost of reason to bring about changes in policies and norms that actually reduce violence in the world.

These changes include not just legal prohibitions on acts of violence but institutions that are engineered to reduce the temptations of violence. Among these wonkish contraptions are democratic government; reconciliation movements in the developing world; nonviolent resistance movements; international peacekeeping operations; and tactics of containment, sanctions, and wary engagement designed to give national leaders more options than just the game of chicken that led to the First World War or the appeasement that led to the Second.

A broader effect of the historically cumulative application of reason, albeit one with many stalls, reversals, and holdouts, is the movement away from tribalism, authority, and purity in moral systems and toward humanism, classical liberalism, autonomy, and human rights. A humanistic value system, which privileges human flourishing as the ultimate good, is a product of reason because it can be *justified*: It can be mutually agreed on by any community of thinkers who value their own interests and are engaged in reasoned negotiation, whereas communal and authoritarian values are parochial to a tribe or hierarchy.

When cosmopolitan currents bring diverse people into discussion, when freedom of speech allows the discussion to go where it pleases, and when history's failed experiments are held up to the light, the evidence suggests that value systems evolve in the direction of liberal humanism. We have seen this in the recent decline of totalitarian ideologies and the genocides and wars they ignited. We have seen this in the contagion of the rights revolutions, when the indefensibility of oppressing racial minorities was generalized to the oppression of women, children, homosexuals, and animals. We have seen this as well in the way that these revolutions eventually swept up the conservatives who first opposed them.

The exception that proves the rule is the insular societies that are starved of ideas from the rest of the world and muzzled by governmental and clerical repression of the press. They are also the societies that most stubbornly resist humanism and cling to their tribal, authoritarian, and religious ideologies. But even these societies may not be able to withstand forever the liberalizing currents of the new global electronic cosmopolitanism.

## MODERN GIFTS

The decline of violence may be the most significant and least appreciated development in the history of our species. Its implications touch the core of our beliefs and values. Hanging in the balance are conceptions of a fall from innocence, of the moral authority of religious scripture and hierarchy, of the innate wickedness or benevolence of human nature, of the forces that drive history, and of the moral valuation of nature, community, tradition, emotion, reason, and science.

Lamentations of a fall from Eden have a long history in intellectual life, and a loathing of modernity is one of the great constants of contemporary social criticism. But empirical acquaintance

with how premodern people lived in fact should not invite envy. Our recent ancestors were infested with lice and parasites and lived above cellars heaped with their own feces. Food was bland, monotonous, and intermittent. Health care consisted of the doctor's saw and the dentist's pliers. Both sexes labored from sunrise to sundown, whereupon they were plunged into darkness.

And it was not just mundane physical comforts that our ancestors did without. It was also the higher and nobler things in life, such as knowledge, beauty, and human connection. Until recently most people never traveled more than a few miles from their place of birth. Everyone was ignorant of the vastness of the cosmos, the prehistory of civilization, the genealogy of living things, the genetic code, the microscopic world, and the constituents of matter and life. Musical recordings, affordable books, instant news of the world, reproductions of great art, and filmed dramas were inconceivable, let alone available in a tool that can fit in a shirt pocket. When children emigrated, their parents might never see them again, or hear their voices, or meet their grandchildren. And then there are modernity's gifts of life itself: the additional decades of existence, the mothers who live to see their newborns, the children who survive their first years on earth.

Even with all these reasons why no romantic would really step into a time machine, the nostalgic have always been able to pull out one moral card: the profusion of modern violence. At least, they say, our ancestors did not have to worry about muggings, school shootings, terrorist attacks, holocausts, world wars, killing fields, napalm, gulags, and nuclear annihilation. Surely no Boeing 747, no antibiotic, no iPod is worth the suffering that modern societies can wreak.

And here is where unsentimental history and statistical literacy can change our view of modernity. For they show that nostalgia for a peaceable past is the biggest delusion of all. We now know that native peoples, whose lives are so romanticized in today's children's books, had rates of death from warfare that were greater than those of our world wars. The romantic visions of medieval Europe omit the exquisitely crafted instruments of torture and are innocent of the thirtyfold greater risk of murder in those times.

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The centuries for which people are nostalgic were times in which the wife of an adulterer could have her nose cut off, a seven-year-old could be hanged for stealing a petticoat, a prisoner's family could be charged for easement of irons, a witch could be sawed in half, and a sailor could be flogged to a pulp. The moral commonplaces of our age, such as that slavery, war, and torture are wrong, would have been seen as saccharine sentimentality, and our notion of universal human rights almost incoherent. Genocide and war crimes were absent from the historical record only because no one at the time thought they were a big deal.

From the vantage point of almost seven decades after the world wars and genocides of the first half of the twentieth century, we see that they were not harbingers of worse to come, nor a new normal to which the world would grow inured, but a local high from which the world would bumpily descend. And the ideologies behind these horrors were not woven into modernity but were atavisms that ended up in the dustbin of history.

The forces of individualism, cosmopolitanism, reason, and science have not, of course, pushed steadily in one direction; nor will they ever bring about a utopia or end the frictions and hurts that come with being human.

But on top of all the benefits that modernity has brought us in health, experience, and knowledge, we can add its role in the reduction of violence.

## THE WORK AHEAD

As a scientist, I must be skeptical of any mystical force or cosmic destiny that carries us ever upward. Declines of violence are a product of social, cultural, and material conditions. If the conditions persist, violence will remain low or decline even further; if they do not, it will not. Still, as one becomes aware of the retreat from violence, the world begins to look different: The past seems less innocent, the present less sinister.

The shift is not toward complacency. We enjoy the peace we find today because people in past generations were appalled by the violence in their time and worked to reduce it, and so we should work to reduce the violence that remains in our time. Indeed, it is a recognition of the decline of violence that best affirms that such efforts are worthwhile. ■