Review Essay

The Long Peace Getting Longer

Adam Roberts

The Better Angels of our Nature: The Decline of Violence in History and its Causes

I confess to an allergy to works of meta-history. The search for the principles governing historical events, the propounding of universal explanations of historical processes: all this suggests a dangerous degree of intellectual over-reach. Especially where they deal with the rise and fall of civilisations, meta-historical works have had shorter shelf lives than their grandiose titles suggested. Oswald Spengler’s The Decline of the West (1918) is now seen as having read the signs completely wrongly. Arnold J. Toynbee’s A Study of History (whose 12 volumes appeared between 1934 and 1961) got many of its historical directions wrong and is seldom read today. And while many such works, including Steven Pinker’s new book, have relied heavily on statistics, it is well known that the use of statistical generalisation in international history has a mixed record. Indeed, the more famous the statistical generalisation, the more likely it is to be either misunderstood or wrong. Norman Angell’s The Great Illusion (1910), for example, was both. Its argument that any European conflict could cause major financial damage was misinterpreted as meaning that war had become impossible; and its claim

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that territorial control brought no benefits was particularly badly argued and was inconsistently pursued by its own author. (Angell’s work has been exposed as shallow and flawed in an excellent recent biography by Martin Ceadel.) There is, moreover, apparently something about statistics that leads to their misuse. The admirable Lewis Fry Richardson, author of *Statistics of Deadly Quarrels* (1950), was often said to have proved that arms races inevitably caused wars, which was pretty much the opposite of what he actually found. Because I became sceptical about the use and frequent misuse of statistics in international relations I often recommended students, before they read anything else in the statistical field, to look at the late Christopher Platt’s *Mickey Mouse Numbers in World History.*

Now, however, I must qualify my scepticism, both about meta-history and statistical methods, and change my advice. In *The Better Angels of our Nature*, Pinker has produced a work of extraordinary range, boldness and thoroughness which presents a remarkably persuasive case for progress: not just in one civilisation, or one part of the world, or one period of time, but globally, and over centuries. He presents progress not as a promise for the future, but as something that has been achieved.

Pinker’s main area of expertise is psychology, including the psychology of language. His mastery of these subjects shows above all in his recognition, which infuses all 800 pages of the book, that people’s assumptions about both present and past dangers are often deeply flawed: digging out the truth can require slow, complex and painstaking detective work.

It certainly is true that there is a human tendency to view the past, especially the distant past, as much safer than it appeared at the time, and the present as more dangerous. Humans are prone to ‘historical myopia’, whereby the closer an era is to our present vantage point, the more detail we can make out. We know that our ancestors survived the many crises (if we remember them at all) through which they lived: and we do not know how present crises will be resolved. So, up to a point, it is quite rational for people to focus on present dangers to the exclusion of past ones. In the study of international relations, this tendency to focus on contemporary dangers has been reinforced by that strand of realist thought that rejects the idea of progress. If power, and interest, are what states are about, and little else
counts, then the well-named Committee on the Present Danger, founded in the United States in 1950 and revived twice since, should be permanently busy and have clones elsewhere.

The decline of international war

Yet in the last few decades there has been a growing recognition that something extraordinary has been happening in world politics. The most obvious sign of this is the decline not only of the incidence of war between states since 1945, but also of the numbers of casualties in those wars. The long peace has now lasted for over six decades. Even subscribers to the realist school have recognised that something is going on. Bob Jervis, a distinguished American specialist in International Relations who describes himself as a Realist with a capital ‘R’, began a recent article with notable caution but could not resist breaking into optimism, especially at the end:

A look at the past should make anyone hesitate to discuss the future of force. In 1811 a sensible person would have predicted that the coming century would be extremely bloody; in 1911 an informed observer could be quite optimistic. It is perhaps this knowledge that leads me in 2011 to see a mixed (but fairly bright) picture.

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Much Realism argues – or assumes – that the anarchic structure of the international system leads to recurring patterns, many of them involving violence, and rules out long-term peace in the absence of clear deterrence. There is much to this perspective, but cost–benefit calculations, norms and values … can and have changed over time.³

This is also Pinker’s essential message, but he adds many interesting twists to the argument, and much evidence in support of them. His longest chapter is about the long peace that is getting longer. Here, his central argument is remarkably bold and counter-intuitive. He suggests that war has been declining over centuries, for a wide variety of reasons which include
memories of past wars, deterrence, the rise of democratic forms of government, international institutions, changes in values, an increase in empathy and more. Thus what we have seen in the past 66 years is, in his view, a continuation of a trend that has far deeper roots.

How on earth can one square such a generalisation with the terrible facts of the first half of the twentieth century? Was it not the century of total war, and of genocides and murderous campaigns within communist, and indeed some other, states? Pinker’s answer is threefold: firstly, to remind us, by both vivid illustration and impressive statistical evidence, that earlier wars were extraordinarily destructive; secondly, that there is a shortage of available evidence for many earlier wars, some of which have been omitted by compilers of statistics; and thirdly, that numbers of casualties should be counted as a proportion of the overall population of the time. As he puts it:

So when one adjusts for population size, the availability bias, and historical myopia, it is far from clear that the 20th century was the bloodiest in history.
Sweeping that dogma out of the way is the first step to understanding the historical trajectory of war (p. 200).

This conclusion, the most controversial one in the book, leads on to a broader discussion of the incidence of wars. Here, too, there is a problem on which critics may well fix. Following Lewis Fry Richardson and many others, he presents data suggesting that the onset of wars is randomly timed, as is their duration: ‘Every instant Mars, the god of war, rolls his iron dice, and if they turn up snake eyes he sends a pair of nations to war. The next instant he rolls them again, with no memory of what happened the moment before’ (p. 206). Here he underestimates the possibility that events whose distribution appears to be random may in fact be very deliberate. The timing and location of weddings might appear to the statistician to be random, but each one, even shotgun weddings, may be the result of conscious decisions by one or both parties. His apparent blindness on this point is all the odder, as it is in no way essential to his argument: quite the reverse.

Pinker is on stronger ground in most of his other statistical analyses. Basing himself on a familiar observation by Richardson, supplemented by
more recent work by Lars-Erik Cederman, he shows that the wars since 1820 conform extraordinarily closely to what is termed in the statistical trade a ‘power-law distribution’; that is, the frequency of an event (war) is in almost exact inverse proportion to its magnitude (the number of deaths in it). This has implications: that there is no such thing as a ‘typical war’; and that ‘it is extremely unlikely that the world will see a war that will kill 100 million people, and less likely still that it will have one that will kill a billion’ (p. 216).

Pinker produces impressive statistical support for his contentions about the changes in the character as well as the incidence of warfare over recent centuries. He shows, for example, that the percentage of wars resulting in the redistribution of territory has sunk from over 70% in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to virtually zero today, Israel’s control of the West Bank and Golan Heights since 1967 being the most obvious exception to this rule.

Some of these data are far from new: Pinker accepts without quibble figures from well-known databases such as the Uppsala Conflict Data Program. (Here I must declare a minute interest: he cites approvingly an article of mine in *Survival* disputing widely accepted claims that 90% of victims of recent wars are civilians.4) What is new in his use of statistics is the way he brings an astonishingly wide range of them together as part of a story which, while it may not always be right in every detail, is strikingly coherent and challenging.

Despite his extensive use of statistics, Pinker does not, for the most part, let number-crunching take priority over other forms of analysis. He confesses at one point: ‘There is no good dataset for all wars throughout the world since the start of recorded history, and we wouldn’t know how to interpret it if there were’ (p. 222). His text, remarkably readable for a work so packed with information, is full of quotations from thinkers, practitioners, pop songs and films.

Here is one quibble: the very scope of what he is attempting – covering much of human history, and drawing on an enviably wide range of
sources – means that he occasionally has to cut corners. One particular corner he repeatedly cuts concerns quotations, which he often takes from secondary sources without going back to the original, resulting in a certain loss of context and, sometimes, authenticity. A small example must illustrate the larger point. In a paragraph showing just how wrong pundits can be, he cites Hans Morgenthau as writing in 1979: ‘The world is moving ineluctably towards a third world war – a strategic nuclear war. I do not believe that anything can be done to prevent it.’ Actually Morgenthau did not write this: he said it, in an interview less than a year before his death. There is a big difference between writing and saying, especially as, in that same interview, Morgenthau expressed doubt about this statement and, for good measure, rejected some of his earlier ‘realist’ assertions of the near-irrelevance of international law and organisation.

Pinker’s coverage of the long peace is also vulnerable to the criticism that he sometimes understates the continuing role of force as a factor in the calculations and actions of governments. Three examples must suffice. Firstly, he states (twice) that the US reaction to the 1979 Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was to express its displeasure by withdrawing its team from the Moscow Olympics. He omits the re-instatement of draft registration, not to mention the arming and supporting of the various guerrilla groups, a strategy that was influential in contributing not only to the Soviet decision to withdraw from Afghanistan, but also to the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union itself, and to the continuation of war in Afghanistan to this day. Secondly, he asserts that the US response to the October 1983 Beirut bombing that killed over 200 American servicemen was to withdraw American forces from the country. True, but the US response also included an intensification of its military relations with Israel. It is even possible that the US-led invasion of Grenada in October 1983 owed something to the need to avenge the humiliation of Beirut. Thirdly, in the course of his spirited argument about the near-irrelevance of nuclear weapons to the actual conduct of international relations, he omits to mention the implicitly nuclear threat that the US made to Iraq in January 1991 to dissuade Saddam Hussein from using certain weapons and tactics in the 1991 Gulf War.
Even if the picture of the decline of force Pinker offers is sometimes overdrawn, his basic thesis remains convincing. The strength of the book is based on the caution and reasonableness of his central arguments. He nowhere claims that the long peace is either all-encompassing or permanent. It coexists with various continuing wars, and it could break down if certain grim possibilities turn out badly. Pinker recognises that a major source of violence in the contemporary world is hasty decolonisation: establishing a new political, social and territorial order is an inherently difficult task and the consequences cast a shadow on the long peace. He is, in short, deeply sceptical about the possibilities of imposing democracy in societies that lack the basic preconditions for it: a sense of social cohesion, a system of justice and a reduction in the habit of violence.

Pinker’s rich exposition of the many causes of the decline of violence includes a particularly interesting discussion of the theory of the democratic peace. This theory is often reduced to the simple proposition that, since no two democracies have ever fought one another, making the world safe for democracy will make it safe more generally. Pinker sensibly refuses to subscribe to the simplicities of this proposition, which could easily be undermined by a single example, and indeed can only be maintained by pushing and shoving states into particular categories. Rather, he argues that in their mutual relations, democracies are statistically less prone to hostile relations and war than is the case when non-democratic states are involved on one or both sides of the ledger. He suggests that in the post-Cold War era democracies have secured a hat-trick: ‘democracies are less likely to wage interstate wars, to have large-scale civil wars, and to commit genocides’ (p. 341).

The decline of violence within states

Pinker locates what he says about war in a far wider setting of a general decline in violence in human society over many centuries, even millennia. He starts from the proposition, for which he presents abundant evidence, that before the formation of states life for most humans really was nasty, brutish and short. He vigorously rebuts Marxist, Biblical and other myths of an Edenic past; and he shows how homicides, a good measure of the level of violence in any culture, have dramatically declined in all developed socie-
ties. As he puts it in the preface, we have been doing something right, ‘and it would be good to know what, exactly, it is’.

Being no one-solutioner, he explores a range of possibilities. He accepts that deterrence played a part in reducing violent crime, but he also examines changes in skills, circumstances and values. He attributes a significant role to Enlightenment thinkers, with their emphasis on the rights of citizens and on the importance of rational justifications for governmental actions. He praises the ‘humanitarian revolution’ whereby, for example, in England the number of capital offences was reduced from 222 to 4 between 1822 and 1861. He sees trade as having broadened horizons and also necessitated cooperative behaviour. He emphasises the huge consequences of the growth of literacy, and he suggests, intriguingly, that the development of the printed book, and the emergence of the novel as a new art form, increased the capacity of humans to understand, even empathise with, others. At the same time, he is at pains to emphasise that what we are witnessing is not a triumph for empathy alone. ‘The decline of violence may owe something to an expansion of empathy, but it also owes much to harder-boiled faculties like prudence, reason, fairness, self-control, norms and taboos, and conceptions of human rights’ (pp. 572–3).

Pinker is not an optimist about human nature. Indeed, he suggests that the American Revolution was better than the French one precisely because it acknowledged human nature with all its faults. As for today, while the reduction of violence in human societies is rightly seen as a great achievement, many of the causes of violence are still there, lurking beneath the surface, and waiting for the right circumstances to re-emerge. Yet even here, Pinker sees some grounds for hope. He does not subscribe to the view that human violence is like a hydraulic force that, stopped in one direction, will find some other direction in which to flow: ‘A mental model in which the world has a constant allotment of violence, so that every cease-fire is re-incarnated somewhere else as a new war, and every interlude of peace is just a time-out in which martial tensions build up and seek release, is factually mistaken’ (p. 377).

This brings us back to war. Today’s civil wars are often seen as evidence that violence is a hydra-headed monster. Cut off the head labelled inter-
national war, and suddenly civil wars appear in much of the post-colonial world. Here again, Pinker uses statistics to good effect, to demonstrate how dramatic the overall decline in all forms of war has been, and how tiny a dent on this trend even the ongoing civil wars and recent terrorist spectaculars have made. His book, with all its imperfections, is much the most interesting work available on the terrifying subject of violence in history. It may be meta-history, but it is wonderfully illuminating.

Notes


