

Book Review

Philip Dwyer and Mark Micale, Editors, *The Darker Angels of Our Nature: Refuting the Pinker Theory of History and Violence*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. Pp. xv + 393. \$29.95 (paper)

Part of the Easter Vigil within the Roman Catholic tradition is the *Exsultet*, a proclamation, made before the paschal candle, that includes a passage describing the primordial sin of Adam and Eve as *felix culpa*, or a “fortunate fall,” given that it made possible the redemptive power of Jesus Christ in the world. In like manner, the 2011 publication of Steven Pinker’s *The Better Angels of Our Nature: The Decline of Violence in History and Its Causes* might also be described as a fortunate fall, for by so thoroughly distorting not only the historical record but also the very nature of history as an academic discipline, it has provoked a rousing response that otherwise would not have existed. The edited collection *The Darker Angels of Our Nature* rather thoroughly corrects Pinker’s claims and redeems the field of history from his misinterpretations. Moreover, while the various chapters are written by area and time period specialists, the whole nonetheless constitutes a rousing defense of world history as a field of special importance.

The thesis of Pinker’s book is, to be brief, this: violence, long endemic to the human condition, has largely been declining since the Enlightenment, as exemplified by selected statistics, so that we now live at the most peaceful time in the history of the planet, thanks largely to modern market economies and the employment of reason, despite the sensationalism of the nightly news playing up individual outbreaks of murder and the like. As the editors note in their introduction, the question is “whether violence, and especially violence across huge swathes of time, can in fact be measured accurately, not least because through history a great deal of interpersonal violence is hidden from public view and is grossly under-reported, and whether that violence can be compared meaningfully across myriad cultures” (6). Whether or not these questions

can be answered, the unanimous conclusion of the various contributors to this volume is that Pinker has not even done due diligence in attempting to answer them.

The first section of the book offers broader critiques of Pinker's *Better Angels*. For example, Daniel Lord Smail examines the sort of sources Pinker consults to construct his thesis and finds them not at all in keeping with the historical mainstream; Pinker's information on the Inquisition, for example, comes from a coffee table book, rather than any of the academic volumes on the subject—a pattern that repeats itself with each time period Pinker alleges to explicate. Dag Lindström surveys Pinker's use of statistics and finds them similarly flawed, noting that Pinker's division between state and non-state actors simply do not apply to the large swathes of history he claims to analyze, and that something like medieval homicide rates are hard to judge accurately given the urban bias in the surviving evidence. Taking issue with Pinker's idea that Enlightenment led to a growing empathy which fostered moral actions such as ending slavery, Eric D. Weitz writes, "In reality, it took determined action, first by slaves themselves, who resisted slavery through rebellion and flight, and then by a segment of the elite that organized an abolitionist movement tied into the international anti-slavery organization headquartered in London" (67). Pinker ignores the actual actors in history in favor of his own narrative of Enlightened progress. Pinker's focus specifically upon homicide rates comes under scrutiny by Philip Dwyer and Elizabeth Roberts-Pedersen, who note how Pinker tries to downplay World War II and the Holocaust in order to highlight how one-on-one homicides actually declined during the Nazi era.

The second and third parts of *Darker Angels* focus upon various time periods and places that offer distinct contradictions to Pinker's claim of the advance of the civilizing process, and there are a number of interesting chapters here. For instance, Linda Fibiger examines the bioarchaeological evidence of violence in prehistory to demonstrate how Pinker distorts the evidence he presents, while Sara M. Butler surveys the variation in terminology for different crimes in the Middle Ages, the difficulty of identifying specific people, and the regular conflation of later developments with the "barbaric" medieval period (flogging as a punishment, for example, being introduced in England under Henry VIII) to demonstrate how extensively Pinker "dabbles in making history, without bothering to acknowledge that it is a discipline with its own rules and methods" (141). In fact, in examining different countries, one can see Pinker's thesis working in reverse, as Nancy Shields Kollman reveals about the history of Russia, where "judicial practice into the nineteenth century... would seem to reflect an aversion to violence," with violence increasing, in fact, as Russia sought to maximize the exploitation of resources in its far-flung empire (172). Caroline Elkins focuses upon the twentieth-century colonial violence perpetrated by the ostensibly enlightened British Empire, violence that Pinker either chose to ignore or simply deny outright: "Yet it's this very denial of evidence—particularly from hundreds of millions of former brown and Black colonial subjects—that renders works like Pinker's so damaging in the historical present" (218).

The last section explores a variety of themes largely ignored by Pinker, such as the Native American perspective on Western colonization, the persistence of racialized policing in modern Western states, and the necessity of regarding environmental interventions as violence. Of particular interest is Joanna Bourke's chapter on sexual violence, in which she excoriates Pinker for attempting to bolster his thesis by "recycling long-standing prejudices about the prevalence of false [rape] accusations" (240) as well as asserting that rape could have been evolutionarily advantageous for the rapist: "By focusing on only one of the mechanisms of selection, Pinker's paradigm privileges a male-based, individualistic, neoliberal account of the evolution of the brain that is primarily about self-interest rather than the group" (248).

As the various contributors emphasize, Pinker posits a diametric oppositionality between violence and rationality and thus completely overlooks how they actually relate to each other. This conclusion has been advanced by various thinkers outside the field of history, too. For example, in *The Goodness Paradox: The Strange Relationship between Virtue and Violence in Human Evolution* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2019), primatologist Richard Wrangham argued that humans constitute a self-domesticated species, and that this domestication was due to lethal violence. His thesis, which differentiates between spontaneous "reactive aggression" and premeditated "proactive aggression," holds that language allowed our ancestors to coordinate lethal attacks against the more violent, tyrannical members of their community, which had the effect of removing more reactive traits from the gene pool. If Wrangham is correct, the decline in one kind of violence is due specifically to the implementation of another. In a similar manner, the philosopher Paul Dumouchel argued in *The Barren Sacrifice: An Essay on Political Violence* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015) that reason can only emerge from violence. Various philosophers had earlier advanced notions of the social contract in which it is reason that puts an end to the primordial war of all against all, as the parties to this conflict come together to endow a state with the monopoly of legitimate violence. But as Dumouchel argued, while the putative war of all against all is ongoing, it remains perfectly rational for the various parties to try to win it; reason can only emerge after a monopoly of legitimate violence has been achieved and the war is at an end. This may sound somewhat parallel to the Pinker thesis, but it means that, when this monopoly is challenged, the line between violence and reason disappears, especially as the modern state is constituted by individuals bound by their self-interest rather than by ties of solidarity.

Pinker extols the power of empathy in bringing about a decline of violence, but as Fritz Breithaupt noted in *The Dark Sides of Empathy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), people can commit atrocities as a direct result of their over-identification with others. For example, if empathy leads me to feel a deeper connection to my countrymen, and if my country is under attack (or, at least, I have been convinced of such), then my empathy for them may lead me to do all manner of horrible things to others. Likewise,

psychologist Dave Grossman argued in *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1995) that human beings are largely resistant to killing, as exemplified by low rates of deliberate lethal fire even among soldiers in World War II; however, modern military and police training and technology has been refined and increasingly “rationalized” to overcome this resistance, thus making individuals even more lethal.

In other words, violence does not exist in a defined relationship with rationality. Moreover, violence is hard to define and to track consistently throughout history. “Truth about the past, and therefore our knowledge of it, can never be more than an approximation,” writes Mark S. Micale in the volume’s coda. “The fragmentary nature of extant sources, the subjectivity of the individual doing the interpreting, and the inescapable pastness of the past limit full comprehension” (318). And though he left it unsaid, we may also derive from this book a sense of just how necessary is a world history perspective when attempting to produce grand narratives that say something about humanity as a whole. Unlike Pinker’s book, this one at least touches upon most of the world’s continents.

But if Pinker’s error was necessary to bring out a book as profound and engaging as *The Darker Angels of Our Nature*, then perhaps it was worth it. *O felix culpa, quæ talem ac tantum méruit habére Redemptórem!*

Guy Lancaster is the editor of the online Encyclopedia of Arkansas, a project of the Central Arkansas Library System, and has published a number of books on race and violence, including *Racial Cleansing in Arkansas: Politics, Land, Labor, and Criminality* (2014) and *American Atrocity: The Types of Violence in Lynching* (2021). He can be reached at glancaster@cals.org.