

ENLIGHTENMENT UNDER SIEGE

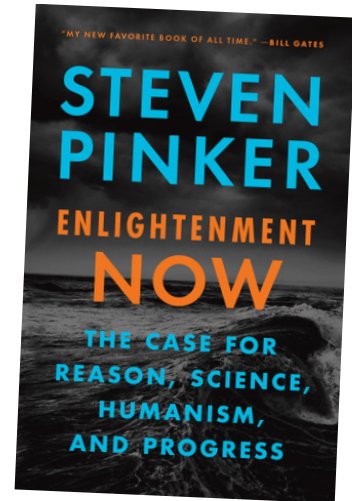
ARE THE OBITUARIES PREMATURE?

Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress

By Steven Pinker

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Reviewed by Suri Ratnapala

People everywhere wondered whether the French would, in turn, decide to retreat to an illusory past, whether they would break step with the world, exit the stage of history, give in to democratic mistrust and a spirit of division and turn their backs on the Enlightenment, or whether, on the contrary, they would embrace the future, collectively create a new impetus, and reaffirm their faith in the values that have made them a great people. On 7 May, the French people made their choice. They should now be thanked.

— President Emmanuel Macron, Inauguration Speech (15 May 2017)¹

The philosophical, scientific, economic and political developments known as The Enlightenment shaped the present market-based liberal democratic order that ushered in the most prosperous era in the history of humankind. This is evident whatever measure we use: life expectancy, health, nutrition, knowledge, personal safety, wealth, human rights, democracy, individual freedom and almost any other indicator of human well-being. Erudite readers of this journal, I expect, would not doubt this. Anyone who does ought to consult the evidence revealed in Steven Pinker’s latest book *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress*.

Resistance to the central ideas of the Enlightenment is as old as the Age of Enlightenment itself. They have been under attack first by the Romantic Movement inspired by Rousseau,

Herder, Fichte, Schiller, Hegel and others, later by Nietzsche and his academic devotees including Heidegger and Carl Schmitt, and in these times by communitarians such as John Gray and Alasdair MacIntyre and postmodernists, big government progressives, statist and collectivists. This Counter-Enlightenment has gathered strength through the resurgence of populism in democratic countries and by the transformation of old Communist states into fascist regimes.



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Many obituaries have been written of the demise of the Enlightenment and its most treasured legacy, liberal democracy. Among them, are doom sayings of elected leaders, journalists and academics. In 1974, the Chancellor of Federal Republic of Germany Willie Brandt gave democracy no more than 30 or 40 years in Europe.² US Senator and diplomat Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote that liberal democracy is ‘a holdover form of government . . . which has simply no relevance to the future’.³ Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre predicted the failure of liberalism because of its rejection of tradition (in his case, Catholic Church doctrine) on which rival claims to truth are based.⁴ John Gray declared that ‘the Enlightenment project’ is in a state of ‘world-historical collapse’.⁵ In 2016 the New York Times columnist Roger Cohen declared that ‘Liberalism is dead. Or at least it is on the ropes’.⁶

Pinker’s book is a resolute moral defence of the core values of the Enlightenment and a fact-based questioning of the obituaries. The book, in my view, is up there with the most important works of the 21st century, at least for those who care about truth, freedom and human well-being. It is a treasure house of source materials including hundreds of data sets from the natural and social sciences. We all suffer to some degree from historical amnesia and availability bias. The former makes us forget how bad things were and the latter amplifies current events into a dystopian view of our condition. *Enlightenment Now* is a compelling antidote to these syndromes. It broadens his earlier work *The Blank Slate* and *The Better Angels of our Nature* into an optimistic thesis about the human condition in the 21st century.

Pinker is a confessed classical liberal. Yet some of his views will rankle persons wherever they sit on the ideological spectrum. He unabashedly favours capitalism under the rule of law as a central legacy of the Enlightenment and the engine of the great escape from poverty (pp.83-84). Nevertheless he sees the need for a moderate welfare state *à la* the prosperous Western European nations, arguing that extensive economic freedom can be combined with social spending (p.365). He sees global warming as a great challenge but rejects heavy-handed regulation in favour of carbon pricing, markets and nuclear energy. He thinks that carbonisation may have already plateaued due to the natural consequences

of personal preferences but more needs to be done (pp.143-145). He strongly endorses gender equality but condemns the denial of physical and psychological differences between men and women. He sees hope in Artificial Intelligence, not reason to fear. A humanist, he rejects faith, superstition and divinity but argues against postmodernism and subjective morality.

I will discuss the most interesting and important themes of the book. The essay will end with a focus on a present threat to the values and institutions of the Enlightenment that is lightly treated in the book. This is the rise of powerful fascist states with global ambitions that oppose the ideals of liberal democracy.

Spirit of the Enlightenment

The meaning of the Enlightenment is poorly understood even among tertiary-educated people. In the words of Immanuel Kant, it represented ‘man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity . . . the inability to use one’s understanding without the guidance from another’.⁷ This meant in practice empiricism, the reliance on evidence and reason to the exclusion of temporal and spiritual authority, superstition and faith in understanding the physical world and our own human nature. Likewise, Pinker’s method is uncompromisingly scientific and reason based, not in the sense of Cartesian rationality but in the way of the Enlightenment thinkers Thomas Hobbes, Immanuel Kant, Baruch Spinoza, David Hume, Adam Smith, Denis Diderot and in our own age, Karl Popper, Friedrich Hayek and David Deutsch. This kind of reason is based on the recognition that human knowledge of a complex and emergent world can never be perfect and can advance only through inquiry free of prejudice and superstition and the acceptance of the fallibility of our most sacred theories and ideas.

In law and politics, the Enlightenment overturned the Divine Right of Kings and, perhaps as significantly, displaced the teleological and theological natural law with theories of universal and subjective natural rights grounded in human experience and need that today find expression in national and international human rights law. In economics, David Hume, Adam Smith and David Riccardo dismantled mercantilist theory to

inspire free trade. Frontiers of science expanded in all directions. The Royal Society was born. Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica* was perhaps the crowning achievement. Newton, a man of deep faith, sought to understand what he regarded as God's laws of the universe through observation and mathematical calculation rather than revelation and classical authority.

Sapere Aude: Entropy, evolution and information

Pinker begins his book by echoing Kant's challenge in his essay 'What is Enlightenment': 'dare to know' (*Sapere aude*)—Go wherever inquiry leads you even if what you find may displease you. Nature does not care about our welfare. Contrary to Plato and Aristotle nature has no plan for us. Nature does not play politics. We must understand nature if we wish to survive and prosper.

We cannot begin to understand nature without knowing the Second Law of Thermodynamics and how it affects our existence. Known popularly as the Law of Entropy, it says that our Universe by nature tends to disorder. In the vastness of the Universe order is actually rare. Order requires energy and effort to maintain. Heat in a kettle will dissipate when the power is switched off. The human body dies and disintegrates without nutrition. Pinker's poignant example: a sandcastle will not be there tomorrow as the wind, waves, seagulls, crabs and little kids rearrange the sand (p.16)

The wonder is that there is order in the Universe at all. There are galaxies and solar systems formed by the process of self-organisation and there are self-replicating life forms on Earth that absorb energy and resist entropy for a while. But they are all transient. Suns burn out, the Universe keeps expanding, organisms die, species become extinct. Survival of species depends on evolution and adaptation to the changing world. Unlike other species we have the ability to gather, process and disseminate information. We can make and test our theories about the world. As Popper memorably said, when we get it wrong, we can 'let our conjectures, our theories, die in our stead'.⁸ We cannot do this if we remain wedded to long held beliefs even when they are refuted by evidence. The Enlightenment's greatest lesson was precisely this. As Pinker says:

If there is anything the Enlightenment thinkers had in common, it was an insistence that we energetically apply the standard of reason to understanding our world, and not fall back on generators of delusion like faith, dogma, revelation, authority, charisma, mysticism, divination, visions, gut feelings, or hermeneutic parsing of sacred texts (p.8).

Romanticists believed that reason cannot be detached from emotion. That is undeniable. It is worth remembering that Hobbes, Hume and Smith were pioneers in the investigation of the mind and the original (inborn) passions, including sympathy, that make us who we are. The difference is this. Romanticists actively fused reason and emotion whereas Enlightenment thinkers strove to isolate emotion as humanly possible from their scientific investigations about the world. Pinker devotes much of the book to the current threats to Enlightenment values and institutions. Many of these would be familiar to the readers of *Policy*. I must start though with one of the most neglected threats to reason—one that springs within us.

Enemy within us: Tragedy of the Belief Commons

A hard barrier to overcome in the search for knowledge is pre-commitment to a worldview or ideology and resistance to other views. Pinker's focus on this problem is a highlight of the book for me. This is a form of tribalism that infects all political groupings whether of the right or left. Pinker calls this the Tragedy of the Belief Commons. We all suffer to an extent from expressive rationality that bends our perceptions and reasoning towards ends that we desire.⁹ How else, asks Pinker, can we understand the most bizarre conspiracy theories that resonated among Trump supporters who believed that Hilary Clinton suffered from multiple sclerosis and was using a double to conceal it or that Barack Obama was implicated in 9/11 (p.358)? Some on the hard left believe that CIA perpetrated the 9/11 attack to start a war. The fake news industry feeds on this kind of irrationality.

Unfortunately, the researchers and policymakers whose mission is to pursue the truth are also not

immune from this syndrome as numerous studies cited by Pinker demonstrate. Even highly numerate respondents are prone to error when ideologically loaded questions are posed in test surveys (pp.360-363). To cite just one example of many, in studies done by Dan Klein and Zeljka Buturovic, a majority of progressives and liberals (in the US sense) disagreed with the statement: 'Restrictions on housing development make housing less affordable'. On the flipside, a majority of libertarians and conservatives disagreed with the statement: 'A dollar means more to a poor person than it does to a rich person'. Both groups, who were literate and numerate, got it wrong.¹⁰

Enemies without: Progressophobia

'Intellectuals hate progress. Intellectuals who call themselves "progressives" really hate progress' (p. 39). So claims Pinker. Progressives will not do without their computers or their antibiotics when they fall sick. The idea of progress that rankles them is the 'Enlightenment belief that by understanding the world we can improve the human condition' (p.39).

There are three categories of persons who deny progress: those who think that there is no progress, those who think that the world has regressed in the values that matter and those who dislike capitalist modes of progress. The first group truly believe that the world is in a downward spiral. A 2015 survey revealed that large majorities in eleven developed countries thought that the world was getting worse (p. 40). Yet by the measures of human well-being the world has got better.

The second group bemoans the destruction of the values of nationalism, cultural identity, religion, valour, spirit and heroism by the atomisation of society and the dilution of national and religious identity and moral disintegration by forces unleashed by the Enlightenment. Plato was an early purveyor of this kind of thinking as was Nietzsche in the 19th century. The standard bearers today are the leaders of what C. P. Snow called the Second Culture, intellectuals who fiercely resist the intrusion of science on their turf.¹¹ Science has its place but has nothing to say about our moral or cultural choices they say. They naturally find powerful allies among conservative communitarians and some religious fundamentalists.

The third class are the remnant Marxists, critical social theorists and postmodernists who regard liberal institutions and capitalist modes of production as means of oppression. The leading prophet of this conspiratorial view is undoubtedly Michel Foucault whose theory of concealed power¹² dominates the thinking of most liberal arts departments.

Breeding ground of demagoguery

In her recent work *Fascism: A Warning*, former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright shows how 20th century fascist movements rode to power on the back of discontent and fear.¹³ Pinker devotes three-quarters of his tome in rebuttal of the dystopian view of life in liberal democratic society fanned by opportunistic politics and anarchic social media that threaten the achievements of the Enlightenment. No society can eliminate discontent and those that tried it, like the communist states, fared the worst. Dissatisfaction is part of being human and is a driver of change and growth. Happiness depends on what a person expects of life and expectations change with the state of the world. Our ancestors did not desire fast food, smart phones, Facebook friends and instant entertainment for they were not of their world. They had other unfulfilled wants.

It is easy to take prosperity for granted and to magnify every problem as a crisis needing a radical response. Pinker warns: 'When we fail to acknowledge our hard-won progress, we may come to believe that every problem is an outrage that calls for blaming evildoers, wrecking institutions, and empowering a leader who will restore the country to its rightful greatness' (p.452). Among these villains are invariably foreigners and minorities, international traders, mainstream politicians, bureaucrats and experts who Donald Trump calls the swamp that needs to be drained. Trump perhaps did not know that '*Drenare la palude*' or 'drain the swamp' was an early catchcry of fascist dictator Benito Mussolini in his surge to power.¹⁴ Surely his advisors Stephen Bannon and Michael Anton knew.

Pinker though is optimistic. He recognises that today's 'Fascism Lite' shades into authoritarian populism and romantic nationalism (p.448). But he reads recent setbacks of populists in France and other European nations as evidence that the world has reached peak populism (p.451). The systematic

forces that sustained the Enlightenment over three centuries are too strong and its stakeholders too many for the movement to be precipitously reversed (p.337). He thinks that the distribution of powers of the US Constitution and real-world constraints are robust enough to defeat authoritarian ambitions.

Madeleine Albright is not so sanguine. Though a lifelong member of the Democratic Party she is neither American 'liberal' nor 'progressive' and the warning of her book should resonate across the political aisle. The United States elected a President who considers the media to be the enemy of the people, who has contempt for the vital institutions and processes of the law, who claims that elections are rigged except when he wins, whose rhetoric divides the nation and who sheets the blame for the nation's real or imagined troubles on aliens.¹⁵ Albright appeals for heightened bipartisan vigilance.

Fascism: The ultimate challenge

Pinker's book deals mainly with the challenges to the Enlightenment arising within liberal democratic societies. Yet it would be folly to neglect the growing threat from what the US Secretary of Defence James Mattis says are 'revisionist powers that seek to create a world consistent with their authoritarian models'.¹⁶ Mattis regards Russia and China as posing greater threats to the US than terrorist movements across the world.¹⁷

The classic fascist regime as epitomised by the Mussolini and Hitler dictatorships consists of authoritarian government dominated by one party led by a charismatic leader. In the fascist state the party and government are difficult to separate. The nation is identified with race and the state becomes the ultimate good. Individualism is suppressed for the communal good, knowledge is censored, and civil liberties are extinguished. The fascist state favours mercantilism against free trade, rejects both liberalism and socialism, adopts capitalist means of production under state control and displaces the rule of law with the will of the regime.

Few states today display all these features but many are trending towards the archetype. Hitler and Mussolini rose to power within democracy. Putin of Russia, Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Chavez of Venezuela, Ortega of Nicaragua, Erdogan of Turkey, and the theocracy of Iran used or are using democratic

pathways to consolidate one party rule. There are easier paths to fascism for leaders who inherit the authoritarian apparatus of failed communist states and military dictatorships. The rulers of China and Russia continue to be the avowed foes of free societies. Russia is working overtly and covertly to reabsorb East European nations into its empire and subvert the democratic processes of Western nations. China's president for life, Xi Jinping, has ambitions of world domination. As David Martin Jones says in the previous issue of *Policy*, the 'China dream is, then, more than a regional vision. It envisages Eurasian hegemony based on China's market heft and capital investment'.¹⁸

There were hopes that Russia and China would eventually join the liberal democratic family as their people have much more to gain by freedom and free exchange with the West.

China's Asia strategy is plain. Chinese state-owned banks give loans to poor countries to fund unaffordable infrastructure (often of doubtful value) to be built by Chinese state-owned corporations with Chinese labour. In Sri Lanka, the Chinese built a cricket stadium in the wilderness, a little used airport, a harbour now owned by the Chinese, and are currently building a 'Port City' on Colombo's waterfront. Lack of transparency in these transactions raises the prospect of corruption and institutional debasement.

There were hopes that Russia and China would eventually join the liberal democratic family as their people have much more to gain by freedom and free exchange with the West. Sadly, the interest of the people do not necessarily coincide with the interest of a fascist regime. The more prosperous the people, the less they are likely to accept state control of their lives. Moreover, fascists need enemies to galvanise nationalists, a key part of their base.

Communitarian conservatives accuse liberals of seeking to impose their conceptions of the good life on others who do not accept liberal values or terms of discourse.¹⁹ Many authoritarian rulers agree. The 'Asian Values Doctrine' is frequently invoked by Asian leaders to justify undemocratic rule. I

have never understood this argument because of its circularity.

- The community does not favour liberal democracy.
- The community opinion has not been tested by a democratic process.
- Why? Because the community does not favour liberal democracy.

Apart from circularity, this argument ignores the fact that liberal political systems allow more room for individual and collective dissent than any previous political or moral system. The liberal tradition is a tradition of toleration. As Brian Barry says, ‘For though liberalism does presuppose a theory of the good, it is one in which freedom plays a central role, and this includes the freedom to create a community based upon non-liberal principles’.²⁰ Liberal societies do not practise ex-communication and inquisition or prevent exit. Pre-liberal societies did. There is mass demand for permanent migration to liberal societies—hardly any to the dictatorships. This must tell us something.

The perennial challenge

The Enlightenment thinking shows that if we have open minds and the spirit of objective inquiry we can solve problems and improve the conditions of life on earth and arrest entropy for a while—which in the time frame of our existence as a race is all that we can care about. Problems are there to be solved with information and reason and to the extent that the laws of nature permit. There is no blissful end state that we can reach. Every solution, every advance in science and technology will pose new problems that invite solution. We cannot prophesy the future. This is the nature of the universe. As the title of David Deutsch’s remarkable work says we are always at *The Beginning of Infinity*.²¹

The story of the Enlightenment is the story of discovery and of correction in the face of evidence and reason. As Pinker says: ‘We believe in it because we have *reasons* to believe it. As we learn more, we can show which parts of the story continue to be true, and which ones false—any of them might be, and any could become’ (p.453).

Endnotes

- 1 <https://np.ambafrance.org/Presidential-election-inauguration-speech>
- 2 *The Economist*, ‘What’s Gone Wrong With Democracy’ (March 2014), <https://www.economist.com/news/essays/21596796-democracy-was-most-successful-political-idea-20th-century-why-has-it-run-trouble-and-what-can-be-do>
- 3 Quoted in W. J. Raymond, *Dictionary of Politics: Selected American and Foreign Political and Legal Terms*, 7th ed (Lawrenceville, VA: Brunswick Publishing Corporation, 1992), 124.
- 4 Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 403.
- 5 John Gray, ‘After the New Liberalism’, *Social Research*, 61:3 (1994), 719–735, 721.
- 6 ‘The Death of Liberalism’ (14 April 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/14/opinion/the-death-of-liberalism.html>
- 7 Immanuel Kant, ‘Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?’, *Berlinische Monatsschrift* (1784), <http://www.artoftheory.com/what-is-enlightenment-immanuel-kant/>
- 8 Karl Popper, ‘Natural Selection and the Emergence of Mind’ in G. Radnitzky and W. W. Bartley (eds), *Evolutionary Epistemology: Theory of Rationality and Sociology of Knowledge* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1987), 152.
- 9 Dan M. Kahan, ‘The Expressive Rationality of Inaccurate Perceptions’, *Behavioural & Brain Sciences* 40 (2017), 26–28.
- 10 Dan Klein, ‘I Was Wrong and So Are You’, *The Atlantic* (December 2011). The statements were among lists of ideologically laden propositions.
- 11 C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1998), 14.
- 12 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse of Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).
- 13 Madeleine Albright, *Fascism: A Warning* (London: William Collins, 2018).
- 14 As above, 24.
- 15 As above, 253.
- 16 *ABC News* (20 January 2018), <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-01-20/china-and-russia-not-terrorism-main-threats-to-us-mattis-says/9345670>
- 17 As above.
- 18 David Martin Jones, ‘Between Declarations and Dreams: China, US Foreign Policy and Southeast Asia’, *Policy* 34:1 (Autumn 2018), 45.
- 19 MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?*, 345.
- 20 Brian Barry, ‘The Light That Failed?’, *Ethics* 100:1 (1989), 160–68, 168.
- 21 David Deutsch, *The Beginning of Infinity: Explanations that Transform the World* (New York: Viking, 2011).