



Response to the Book Review Symposium: Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*

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The Better Angels of Our Nature: A History of Violence and Humanity
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Response to Book Review Symposium (*Sociology* 47(6) [2013]: 1224–1232)

They say that ideology is like breath: you never smell your own.¹ And so I was not surprised to see my book *The Better Angels of Our Nature: A History of Violence and Humanity* described as ‘ideological’ by reviewers who strike me as black pots in glass houses casting the first stone. By the same token, it is not easy for an author to defend himself against such an accusation: ‘I am not ideological’ is bound to sound as convincing as ‘I am not a crook’ and ‘I did not have sex with that woman.’

But I will take my chances. The arguments in *The Better Angels of Our Nature* are in fact not ideological. They are empirical, though the facts on which those arguments are based are bound to gore some oxen of the hard left, critical theory, and various forms of post-X-ism (together with certain livestock of the hard right, libertarianism, and anarchism).

As I note in the preface, and as the paper and internet trails of my writing confirm, *Better Angels* was inspired by my coming across diverse datasets showing historical declines in violence. The existence of these declines (such as homicide since the Middle Ages, corporal and capital punishment since the 18th century, great-power wars since 1945, and autocracies since the 1980s) are well accepted by the scholarly communities who study them, but they surprised me at the time, continue to surprise most readers, and are adamantly denied by those who are unfamiliar with the relevant literatures.

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Also, the ideology that has been pinned on me in the past (not least by one of the reviewers) is hardly one that people associate with a progressive view of the human condition. As an advocate of evolutionary psychology, I am supposed to believe in evolutionary selfishness, genes for aggression, demonic males, the territorial imperative, adaptations for rape, and other original sins that allegedly rule out hopes for reform and justify a reactionary fatalism.

It is true, as the reviewers note, that I point out some good things about modern liberal democracies, particularly that they have relatively low rates of several categories of violence such as war, homicide, and aggression against women, children, and gay people. But I will go out on a limb and submit that this is not an ideological dogma but a defensible factual claim. That is, I believe the evidence suggests that countries like Canada, Denmark, and New Zealand are less violent, and more conducive to several other measures of human flourishing, than various alternatives such as Maoist China, Fascist Europe, the Soviet Union, Islamic theocracies, Iron-age empires, African strongman states, medieval knightly fiefdoms, and tribal societies that valorize manly honor and blood revenge. If that banal observation is 'ideological', the term has lost all meaning.

I am prepared to risk a second defensive assertion. Whatever *Better Angels* may be, it is not 'simplistic' or 'reductionist'. This 800-page book uses one hundred graphs and twelve hundred references to document six historical trends, five psychological sources of violence, four psychological sources of nonviolence, and five historical forces in which social, cultural, and institutional changes interact with the psychology. Any scholar who wishes to engage with it is going to have to work harder than slinging around these knee-jerk epithets.

Let me turn to the individual reviews. Larry Ray's is the most generous, for which I am grateful, but many of his criticisms are inaccurate. He quotes me as claiming that rape is 'instinctual sexual desire', words that appear nowhere in the book, and faults me for not attributing rape to 'an expression of patriarchal power'. In fact the book examines and refutes that politically correct dogma, which preposterously implies either that men do not want sex or that sex is the one thing men want that no man ever tries to seize by force. He claims that I fail to cite Bruce Knauft's supposed finding that violence is 'low in many pre-state societies but [rises] periodically'. In fact I cite Knauft extensively, including the article in which he notes that 'the [New Guinea] Gebusi rate of killing during 1940–82 is 40 times the current U.S. rate of lethal violence' and 'only the most extreme instances of modern mass slaughter would equal or surpass the Gebusi homicide rate over a period of several decades' (p. 463). Ray writes that my 'reading of Biblical accounts of extreme violence is surprisingly literal rather than allegorical', but the 'surprisingly literal' misreading is his. I cap off that discussion by writing 'The good news, of course, is that most of it never happened' (p. 10); the topic of the discussion was cultural attitudes, not historical events. Ray correctly notes that the statistic that 0.7 percent of the world's population died in wars pertains only to direct battle-related deaths, but he fails to note the relevant continuation: 'Even if we tripled or quadrupled the estimate to include indirect deaths from war-caused famine and disease, it would barely narrow the gap between state and nonstate societies' (p. 50). And to his astonishing claim that 'Pinker does not develop a theory of violence, nor examine the nature of violence in different contexts', I can only reply: read the book again.

Ray notes that I do not engage with writers such as ‘Bauman, Collins, Foucault, Malešević, Scheff, and Scheper-Hughes, to name a few’. Yes, and he could have named many more. This would count as criticism if he could identify some point that any of these writers made that explained the phenomena I address or undermined any of my analyses. But *Better Angels* is a book about violence, not about professors, and I do not subscribe to the style of scholarship that fetishizes a few hallowed theoreticians rather than seeking to explain things with the best intellectual tools available.

In his review, John Lea notes that ‘the facts are in his [i.e. my] favor’. I can assure him, though, that most people did not ‘know that already’. The claims in *Better Angels* are commonly met with incredulity and furious denial.

Together with Hilary Rose, Lea correctly observes that I restrict the term ‘violence’ to violence. I do not extend it metaphorically to other deplorable conditions that some theorists tendentiously call ‘structural’ or ‘slow’ violence, such as disease, poverty, inequality, or pollution. Not everything that is unpleasant in life is the result of deliberate malevolence or exploitation. Just as a book on cancer need not have a chapter on metaphorical cancer (the coarsening of popular entertainment, the decline of civility in politics, and so on), a coherent book on violence cannot lump together slave auctions and death camps with uneven economic development and the spread of AIDS as if they were a single phenomenon. To equate them all as different forms of ‘violence’ is to get carried away with words and to confuse moralizing and politicized theorizing with understanding. Physical violence is a big enough topic for one book, and even if the only thing that changed over the course of history was that physical violence decreased, that would be an important phenomenon to document and explain. As it happens, violence is not the only unpleasant thing that has changed: disease, poverty, illiteracy, premature death, and other scourges of the human condition have decreased as well, but documenting and explaining those developments would require another book (such as Charles Kenny’s (2011) *Getting Better*).

Like Ray, Lea faults me for not taking Foucault seriously, but the omission was deliberate. Notwithstanding his guruhood in certain sectors of the academy, Foucault is not the only scholar to have noticed that European states eliminated gruesome punishments, and his own theory strikes me as eccentric and poorly argued. See JG Merquior’s (1985) essay ‘Charting carceral society’ in his book *Foucault* for a lucid deconstruction. As for the theoretician who inspired Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, and the North Korean Kims, Marx is obviously a key figure in the history of violence as one of its causes, but I consider it a pathology of certain sectors of academia that he is still taken seriously as one of its explainers.

Lea’s ideological attribution of ideology to *Better Angels* is based on my failure to genuflect to ‘critical theory’, and so he considers it a valid criticism that I present studies which do not sit well with its doctrines. The sources in *Better Angels* show that democracies on average fight fewer wars than autocracies (notwithstanding the wars fought by the United States, which is far from a typical democracy), that policing policies matter to swings in crime rates whereas relative deprivation does not, and that there is no sign that post-Cold War stability is being undermined by resource conflicts fueled by western states and transnational corporations. Lea may be right that ‘many’ believe it is, but the fact that many people believe something has nothing to do with whether it is correct.

What Lea and Rose correctly sense is that *Better Angels* does not subscribe to a demonological theory of history with the West and its corporations as Great Satan. It is only through the lens of that demonology that my attempt to take a disinterested stance appears to them as an agenda of celebrating the West. In fact the acts of violence perpetrated by western states and empires are on full display. Imperial and colonial wars and genocides are featured prominently in the book's graphs and lists of atrocities, and they are discussed in at least 25 places in the text. Slavery, the slave trade, lynching, religious wars and persecutions, and violence against women are also discussed (as are comparable practices in non-western civilizations).

It is true that I give credit to certain violence-reducing ideas and institutions that largely originated in the West, including human rights, liberal democracy, abolitionism, secular humanism, feminism, peacekeeping, and gay rights (together with some that did not come out of the West, such as reconciliation programs and nonviolent resistance). A major theme of *Better Angels* is that with increasing cosmopolitanism and technologies of information exchange, the world has aggregated violence-reducing ideas from many sources, just as it has done so with technological advances. But the prosecutorial mindset of certain leftist ideologies is discomfited by the fact that human rights, free speech, democracy, feminism, gay rights, and other good ideas largely originated in, and have been disproportionately embraced by, modern western societies. And so it chooses not to acknowledge the difference between an endorsement of these *ideas* and a chauvinistic celebration of the *West*. This inability to see straight may explain Lea's claim that the book leads to 'a version of Samuel Huntingdon's [*sic*] clash of cultures' – a thesis I examine and explicitly reject (pp. 365–368).

In her own review, Rose makes four errors of attribution. First, the thesis of *Better Angels* is not that state pacification is the sole cause of the historical decline of violence; it is that it is one of five causes. Second, the tallies of deaths in warfare are not 'largely limited to those of the military'. The book presents (and carefully distinguishes) two kinds of tallies, neither of which exclude civilians: 'battle-related deaths', which include soldiers and civilians killed directly in battles, and 'excess deaths', which add the deaths attributable to war-caused famine and disease. Third, *Better Angels* explicitly *disavows* the idea that civilizing processes take place in some 'linear way', which is why it is organized around six historical declines in violence taking place at different times and on different time-scales, and why it spends considerable amounts of discussion on local reversals.

Most significantly, there is no 'U-turn' from my previous books, such that I now endorse recent genetic change as a cause of the decline of violence. The lengthy discussion of the evidence for and against recent biological change (pp. 611–622) ends with the sentence 'At least for the time being, we have no need for that hypothesis.' Incidentally, if I *had* rethought my views on recent biological evolution in light of new findings from genomics, this would represent a strengthening, rather than a weakening, of the evolutionary approach that Rose despises, since it would imply that humans are genetically adapted to recent as well as ancient environments, and would open the door to genetic differences among races and ethnic groups. But the point is that she has misunderstood the main idea of *Better Angels*, introduced in the preface and repeated many times: 'The focus of the book is on transformations that are strictly environmental: changes in historical circumstances that engage a fixed human nature in different ways' (p. xxv).

As for the boo-words ‘Panglossian’, ‘high Victorian progressivism’, and ‘Whiggish’ (the latter from Lea), they are as predictable as they are mindless. It is a matter of empirical fact whether the risk of violent death has changed over time. If it has – and as Lea notes, the facts are in my favor – then we need to explain that fact, that is, to identify a process that can cause such improvement. To label this straightforward intellectual responsibility as ‘Panglossian’ or ‘Whiggish’ is to substitute name-calling for analysis.

Like Ray and Rose, Bhatt seems to choke on every page in *Better Angels*, and his distaste has confounded his ability to assess it. He should have fact-checked his claim that John Locke is ‘neglected’ in *Better Angels*; the index lists more than a dozen pages in which he or his books are discussed. Ditto with his remarkable claim that ‘the actual modern state and its capacities relating to education, welfare, public health and so forth are absent from this book, as is the UN, education, social and economic mobility, national or global institutions, social movements or civil society’. Bhatt must have riffled past the hefty sections in which these factors are evaluated. Particularly odd is his assertion that the book’s endorsement of Enlightenment humanism lacks a commitment to the inherent equality of all human persons: that is exactly the conclusion of the lengthy section devoted to that topic.

Bhatt’s allergy to evolution is so systemic as to have clouded all discernment. It is true that I make no apology for invoking evolution as part of the explanation for patterns in human violence. Aggression is widespread among mammalian species, including our primate cousins, and is robustly linked to hormones, brain circuitry, genetic variation, and biological sex (notwithstanding long-discredited sniping from the ‘radical science’ movement of the 1970s and 1980s). The possibility that evolution is completely irrelevant to an understanding of human violence can only be taken seriously by creationists and blank-slate fundamentalists. And since for these biophobes, the correct amount of evolutionary analysis in human affairs is zero, Bhatt wildly exaggerates the centrality of evolutionary psychology in *Better Angels*. Though I do believe that evolution is indispensable in explaining psychological faculties, I also believe that it is just one of several indispensable levels of analysis.

In hurling every bad thing he can think of at evolutionary psychology, Bhatt has debated himself into incoherence. Logically speaking, explanations in evolutionary psychology cannot be both circular and reductionistic. Nor can they be both circular and factually incorrect. Bhatt similarly flails at basic game-theoretic concepts such as ‘costs’, ‘free-rider’, and ‘positive-sum’, and though it is hard to find an argument in his disorganized discussion, he seems to be suggesting that they are irrelevant to human affairs. But game theory (which at one point Bhatt disconcertingly likens to video games) simply analyzes the possible outcomes of interactions between intelligent, goal-seeking social agents. It could only be irrelevant to human affairs if human beings were unintelligent, uninterested in their own welfare, asocial, or exempt from the laws of mathematics.

Bhatt does raise a substantive question in asking how advances in medicine affect estimates of historical trends in homicide and war. As I note in the book, they do, but not by much. First, the historical declines in tribal warfare and individual homicide all occurred long before any advance in medicine or public health. Second, when it comes to institutionalized brutality, advances in medical treatment are beside the point: it is not as if modern societies still burn heretics at the stake or hang runaway slaves and then put

the remains in an ambulance and rush them to an emergency room. Third, a little arithmetic shows why medical treatment can have only a marginal effect on long-term trends in war. Medicine affects percentages; war deaths vary over orders of magnitude. Even if modern medicine could have saved 75 percent of the victims of the Second World War (a ridiculously generous estimate, considering how many died in the complete devastation of sieges, firestorms, and holocausts), there still would have been more than thirteen million deaths, dwarfing the total from all wars since.

Bhatt concludes, 'This book could have been published with those same evolutionary arguments on the eve of the First or Second World War or the Korean War.' It is clear that this comment is intended as snide, but it is not clear what it means. If Bhatt is trying to say that nothing has changed in evolutionary biology since 1914, he must be unaware of the revolutions of the Modern Synthesis and evolutionary genetics, together with the breathtaking advances in neuroscience, genomics, psychology, and data science which so threaten the involuted scholasticism of his 'interpretation and reinterpretation'. If he means to imply that an attention to human nature requires ignoring the historical changes that have taken place since 1914, he has snoozed past the book's central thesis, which is that evolved psychological faculties are open-ended combinatorial systems which are sensitive to the social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which they find themselves (and which they are ultimately responsible for having created). Or does he mean that the worlds of 1914, 1939, or 1950 are really no different from the world of today, so that it is naïve to write about a decline in the likelihood of major violence? This possibility can be put to an empirical test. At the time of this writing (early March 2014) international tensions are running high over competing US, European, and Russian interests in a chaotic Ukraine, which has been riven by a coup, ethnic conflict, a Russian military incursion, and possible secessions by Crimea and eastern regions. These are just the kinds of tensions that in the past led to great-power wars with millions of deaths. I predict that because of the changes documented in *Better Angels*, such a war will not take place. By the time this article is published readers will know whether the prediction is correct.

Note

1. Commonly attributed to the economist Joan Robinson.

References

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