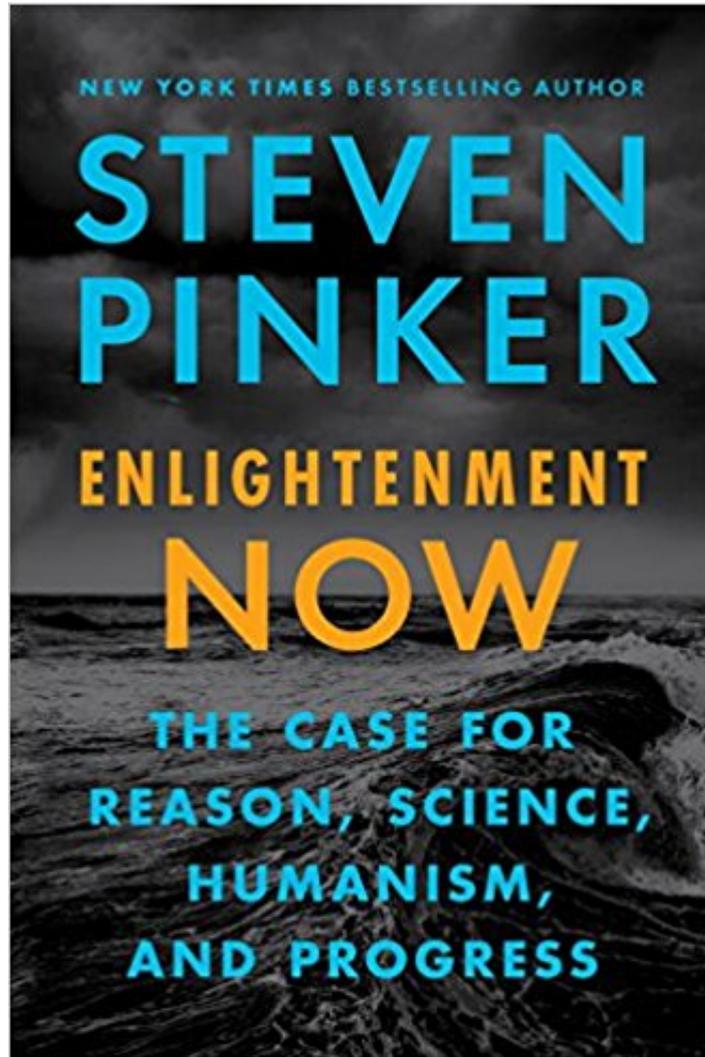


<http://somatosphere.net/2018/03/enlightenment-now-and-empathy-later.html>

‘Enlightenment’ now and empathy later?

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By Agustín Fuentes



Steven Pinker wrote *Enlightenment Now* thinking he was making the case for “reason, science, humanism, and progress.” But instead produced a 556 page text filled with some interesting statistics, a few valid insights, a lot of naiveté, and a stunning lack of empathy.

Let me be clear about a few things: I both practice and love science, especially evolutionary biology. And, based on my work on human evolution, human capacities, and human histories, I am relatively optimistic

about humanity. I am neither a “progressophobe” nor “dataphobic.” I agree with Pinker that many material, and some social, facets of life have gotten better for many, but not all, people across the past three centuries, and I especially agree with Pinker’s musings on terrorism and knowledge. However, because of my anthropological training, my research into human evolution and behavior, and my interest in the human condition, I cannot share in Pinker’s blithe assertions that things are truly getting better for everyone and that trusting the current dominant geo-political-economic system is going to bring us to the goals of the enlightenment (at least his version of it).

Many commentators have already tackled the historical deficiencies in “Enlightenment Now”, so I won’t overlap with those commentaries here. Suffice to say that they include a demonstration of Pinker’s broad ignorance of environmental issues by the author [George Monbiot in *The Guardian*](#), and evaluations of Pinker’s misrepresentation of the enlightenment itself by the historian [David A Bell in *The Nation*](#) and by the historian and noted humanist [Peter Harrison for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation](#). Rather, I want to start my review by pointing out something that has concerned me for a long time and that has grave implications for the contents and purpose of this book: Pinker’s dramatic lack of understanding of evolutionary processes and the human evolutionary record. These basic flaws undergird Pinker’s world view and infuse his assumptions about the processes of life with a level of simplistic determinism so deep that it is no wonder his take on systems of such massive complexity as human economic, political, ecological, and social histories, border on the facile.

One can find, on page 25 in Pinker’s “reality-setting” chapter, *Entro, Evo, Info*, the deep misunderstandings of human evolution that reflect an extremely one-dimensional take on how the world works and is. Pinker tells us that evolution guarantees lots of malevolence in the world because “natural selection consist of competition among genes to be represented in the next generation, and the organisms we see today are descendants of those that edged out their rivals in contests for mates, food and dominance.” This might be a reasonable statement for a college freshman before taking a biological anthropology or evolution course, but not a Harvard professor who often writes about human evolution. He then tells us that “evolution left us with another burden: our cognitive, emotional, moral faculties are adapted to individual survival and reproduction in an archaic environment, not to universal thriving in a modern one,” — a statement that the last 40 years of anthropology, behavioral ecology, neurobiology, social psychology, and human evolutionary studies resoundingly refute. But as Pinker relies on the decades old works of Richard Dawkins and a cluster of Evolutionary Psychologists to inform his views on evolution, this is not too surprising. Contemporary

understandings of evolution are diverse and complex, with multiple modalities, and levels, of evolutionarily processes affecting structure, function, adaptation, inheritance and change (eg. [Laland et al. 2015](#), [Jablonka and Lamb 2014](#)). An absurdly simplistic representation of evolution underpins much in Pinker's thinking about the world setting the stage for his "understandings" of human processes.

As an example, on that same page (25), Pinker tells us that poverty "needs no explanation. In a world governed by entropy and evolution, it is the default state of humankind." What does this statement even mean? His working use of the term "poverty" is basically a measure of relative economic status and access to material goods, nothing about life history and development, navigating structural violence, and experiences of identity, community and history. And while he does spend a lot of time on measures of "happiness" in the book, he does so at mainly national levels and ties it to political and economic systems, ignoring a wide swath of social psychological and ethnographic data on the topic. How one could seriously think to create and use a definition of "poverty" that stretches across all of human history and have it measure something valuable (and viable) boggles the imagination.

In chapters 4-18 Pinker lays out the data and interpretations in support of his claim that we (all humanity) are healthier, wealthier and happier than ever before, and that it is due to a specific suite of philosophical, political, economic and scientific advances emerging mainly from the European-North American cultural landscape. He marshals a large number of graphs that demonstrate technological and structural improvements in many areas over the last 300 years. But he never engages with the corollary impacts, social, psychological, and structural, on humans, on other animals and on landscapes of these aspects of progress. There is, in these pages, much interesting information about GDP, changing health patterns, technological advances, and even something called "gross world product" (presented in my favorite meaningless graph on pg. 81), but much of it hangs in the air without any critical appraisal or real context. For example, after discussing inequality, via an extensive reliance on the Gini index, he concludes that "the rich have gotten richer, but their lives haven't gotten *that* much better. Warren Buffet may have more air conditioners than most people, or better ones, but by historical standard the fact that a majority of poor Americans even *have* an air conditioner is astonishing" (pg 119, italics his). And effectively disregards the violence of inequality by letting us know that "the lives of the poor are improving more rapidly than the lives of the rich" (pg 120).

These chapters are dense with graphs and charts and references to economists and a range of other geo-political, economic, and population level social research. But there is little context, and no attempt to

understand how these analyses intersect with patterns and processes of structural violence, of racism, sexism, and disempowerment, the building and collapsing of colonial empires and the enslavements, forced movements, cultural obliterations, and genocides of many populations across the past ~300 years. In an effective understanding of the human condition these things cannot be discounted. Pinker does nod in a few places, to the fact that there are bad things and times in the world, but in a very facile and limited way, always noting that if we hang in there, they too will get better.

Pinker seems in awe of the wonderful image of the right side of a chart or graph plot sweeping upward towards the sky, but never truly engages with what that two-dimensional image might actually mean for the diversity of humans involved, and how such representations manipulate reality to conform to specific, and often simplistic, parameters. Pinker's fervent reliance on graphs and statistics is particularly interesting given that a group of colleagues and I ([Oka et al. 2017](#)) recently published an article with a wide range of data sets and mathematical analyses, in concert with graphs and charts, to demonstrate that a key assumption of Pinker's previous book (decreasing violence measured via war deaths over time) was not supported. When a writer for [Science](#) magazine asked Pinker for comment about our article he responded "Fitting numbers to an equation in this way gives only a narrow look" and that what we did was just "a statistical gimmick."

Why does this matter for anthropology? Because Pinker's book is already a best seller being read by tens of thousands of people and many of the reviews laud his truly "scientific" perspective and his daring stance against the progressophobes, lefty intellectual zealots, religious fanatics, and naysayers of the world. Pinker explicitly disregards or dismisses much of the realities that anthropologists work in, against, and for. For example, in his simplistic glorification of progress, and his version of science, he even goes as far as to downplay the horrors of the Tuskegee experiment as simply a "one time error to prevent harm to a few dozen people" (pg 401). His world-view and his apologetics for colonialism, empire, racism, structural violence, etc... have direct impacts on the ways in which his readers see, experience and believe the world to be. His message is crystal clear: trust in markets, western style-governments, technology, and "science" and all will be fine. This is in direct opposition to much of what anthropological knowledge reveals about the world.

I realize this is a harsh critique. I should note that at the same time I was reading Pinker's book I was reading [James Baldwin's *Dark Days*](#) collection of essays and preparing a series of six lectures on human evolution, biology, culture and the human capacities for imagination and belief. It was precisely this context that made me so very aware of how "Enlightenment

Now” reflects Pinker’s lack of knowledge about evolutionary process and complexity in human history, and his utter lack of connection, and empathy, with the experiences, histories and realities of people who are not just like him.

Reading the whole book one is left asking *for who* is this “scientific and humanistic progress” working such that things are really ok and increasingly getting better? Not the Oglala Lakota, the Tsitsistas/Suhtai (Cheyenne), or countless other indigenous societies across the planet who have been stripped of their land, history and rights. Not for those minority groups in the USA, in Myanmar, and across many of the world’s nations, who are discriminated against, incarcerated, and disenfranchised at levels massively above those of their co-citizens. Not for countless women across the planet, including those in the west, who are routinely discriminated against, denied equal value and attacked and abused with astonishing frequency.

No, Pinker is writing this book for himself and those who share his world and world view. Case in point: when one of the richest people in the world (Bill Gates) and one of the most prominent public academics in the world (Steven Pinker), both of whom are white men, chatted about “humanity” for the [New York Times](#) they stated, without irony, that today more than ever “we’re living longer, with greater wealth, peace and equality, and less racism and sexism.” This says a lot about who wants reassurance that the “bad stuff” is not so bad. The point of *Enlightenment Now* is to convince us that if we just keep to that which made the world great for Pinker and Gates then everything, and everyone, will be just fine. Just fine.

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