

Cato Institute Daily Podcast
"Human Progress Marches On"

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January 5, 2015
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Caleb Brown: This is the Cato daily podcast for Monday, January 5, 2015. I'm Caleb Brown. The world is improving across most vital metrics and has been for a long time. Psychologist and Harvard professor Steven Pinker has studied these trends extensively for various books. We spoke following a Cato Institute event for HumanProgress.org.

In 2012 or 2013, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, told the Senate Armed Services Committee "I will personally attest to the fact that the world is more dangerous than it has ever been," and most people don't really question that. What do you say to Martin Dempsey and the people who would be likely to believe what he says?

Steven Pinker: More dangerous than the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962? More dangerous than 1941 when Hitler was overrunning Europe? I mean, this is an astonishing statement. But it's not that surprising because in every era people say it's the most dangerous time in the history of the human race. Even in the 1990s where a lot of us fondly remember that as a time after the fall of the Soviet Empire and a time of prosperity and relative piece. You had a cover story on *The Atlantic* saying that the world was going to fall apart, that the southern regions of the United States were going to join Mexico, that African-Americans were going to revolt against white America in sympathy with their brethren in Africa, that Brazil was going to fall apart, that India was going to fall apart. This was a cover story in *The Atlantic Monthly*, so, during a relatively peaceful time. So it just shows that commentators are always saying that we're letting in the most dangerous time ever.

Caleb Brown: I know a lot of young people who watch the news and they say I don't know if I want to have kids because we live in such a dangerous world. Why, if you are correct, and I think you are, why do we cling to this idea and why does this idea have such currency?

Steven Pinker: Yeah, it is remarkable. People did have kids during the Second World War, for example, when people worldwide were being killed at a rate of 300 per 100,000 per year. Since then, in the 1950s, the early 1950s, the rate was in the teens, then it fell into the single digits by the 70s and 80s, then it fell to less than one per 100,000 per year in the first decade of the 21st century. In the last year, because of the Syrian civil war, it has crept up a bit, from about, say, half of a person per 100,000 per year to one per 100,000 per year. So, there's a sense in which it's a doubling, but it's a doubling to what is still, by historical standards, a remarkable low. There are some parts of the world that are quite, you know, nasty and ugly. And of course, those are the ones that make the news. The parts of the world that are at peace don't attract headlines. You just never see a reporter saying here I am on the street of, the streets of, capitol

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of Angola, and there's no civil war. But a few decades ago there would have been a civil war there. Now that there isn't, by definition, it's not news.

Caleb Brown: So many people make peace like an overt part of their lives, a lot of activists. I'm a Quaker, so a lot of the people that I attend meeting with are overtly about peace, but I find a lot of these same people who make peace such a high priority in their lives also have very strong priors against free markets, against capitalism more broadly. What would you have to say to people like that and what has been the role of trade and capitalism in global violence?

Steven Pinker: You know, probably, on average, although not without exception, on average, free markets tend to correlate with peace to such an extent that there is a debate in the international relations literature over whether the famous democratic peace, the fact that democracies don't fight each other, might actually be a capitalist peace. That is, the capitalist countries tend not to fight each other, for the obvious reason that you don't attack your customers, you don't attack your suppliers. If you, if it's cheaper to buy things than to steal them then plunder becomes less attractive as an option. Now, the final tally is not in and the regression walks go back and forth as to whether it is democracy or capitalism that is the major force, or international organizations, belonging to treaty organizations, organizations like the United Nations, ad hoc peacekeeping forces. That's the third factor that tends to drive the rate of violent conflict down, because they tend to be correlated with each other. Capitalist countries are often, but not always, democratic and vice versa. And they also tend to be better-behaved members of the international community. You have to do some statistical trickery to figure out which of those three is doing the work. Probably all three are, but the fact that the debate is being held shows that markets do seem to be a contributor to peace.

Caleb Brown: So you'd say it's like a chicken and egg problem, in a sense?

Steven Pinker: It's kind of the typical social science tangle, where everything is correlated with everything else, and so you try to look for a little bit of variance that's not correlated with everything else to see if that's what's driving the variable that you're interested in. In this case, likelihood of armed conflict. But in, you know, in general but not always. I don't think that if the whole world became capitalist war would come to an end, but in general if you are engaged in a lot of international trade, if you're more interested in prosperity for your citizens than in national, or racial, or religious glory, or in rectifying past injustices. That will kind of tilt you away from thinking that war is such a great idea.

Caleb Brown: After we humans meet our basic needs of, you know, food, clothing, and shelter and that sort of thing, it seems like we have this capacity to continue devoting the same amount of brain space to worrying about problems, however big those problems are. Could you talk about that just a little bit?

Steven Pinker: Yeah, we do tend to adapt to our current level of comfort and always, you know, look downward to how much worse it can be. And so people do tend to take improvements in

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well-being in stride. So we're not as grateful as we ought to be for things like, you know, flush toilets, electric light, running water. Things that, of course, people in the developed well are literally dying because they don't have. But very few people wake up in the morning and flush the toilet and think thank goodness I've got a flush toilet. But they really ought to, aside from the sheer pleasantness of everyday existence, flush toilets save lives. One of the major causes of premature death is cholera and other diseases that come from transmission of pathogens via human waste. But, you know, it doesn't seem to affect our day-to-day mood, even though objectively speaking it really does affect our well-being.

Caleb Brown: Some people just don't respond to the data. And you have a wealth of data over various books that, I think, makes a very compelling case that we're living in a relatively wonderful time on this planet, so is there anything you can tell people who just aren't going to respond to that data, who are going to see this immediate problem and - or, in a sense, incapable of taking the long view that you lay out?

Steven Pinker: Well, you know, I begin my book on this topic, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, with a - before I get to the hundred graphs and the hundreds of studies - with a qualitative narrative chapter, where I simply try to remind people from myth and literature and story and popular history of how gruesome a place the world used to be. You know, the fact that if you riffle through the old testament there is one genocide after another, often ordered by God. That, you know, Jesus was put to death by crucifixion, not lethal injection. That the medieval knights would chop off body parts and rape unattached women as a matter of course. Henry VIII put to death two of his wives by decapitation. The Vice President and Secretary of the Treasury of the United States fought a lethal duel. There's a lot of violence that's woven into our cultural memory that people don't tend to remember when they think about what the world was like in the past, and that's before you even look at the statistics.

Caleb Brown: So what is it that we can do to avoid some of our worst impulses as humans? There are, naturally, awful things going on around the world but taking the long view and giving ourselves that perspective.

Steven Pinker: Well I think our intellectual and journalistic culture has to become more evidence-based, data-oriented, quantitative. That the current practice of journalism, of report a story, ask a person on the street there, comments on the story, and then a columnist or pundit tells people who to emote with regard to the story. That's not a way to give people an accurate understanding of the world. Stories - the events of the day should be put into historical context. By historical context, I don't mean, you know, the Roman Empire. I mean like the last ten years, the last twenty years. And they should be put in quantitative perspective, and that also requires that our whole literary intellectual culture as well be more quantitative. I lobbied for a stronger data and statistics requirement among Harvard undergraduates because I believe that being an educated person means thinking statistically and quantitatively, and our intellectual elite just don't do that.

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Caleb Brown: Steven Pinker is an advisor to HumanProgress.org and is a professor of psychology at Harvard University. Read more about the long history of human progress at HumanProgress.org and CATO.org.

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