

Book Review

Steven Pinker

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

New York: Penguin Random House, 2018

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Canadian Thinkers and Steven Pinker

For most of its history, Canadian social and political thought has been mainly derivative. It has been the result of inhabiting a geographically remote cultural backwater defined both by insularity and a suppressive colonial mentality. The best Canadians seemed able to do was to mock themselves (however gently) through the bemused writings of political economist and humourist Stephen Butler Leacock (1875-1944), or to rely on a few brilliant, but focussed exemplars of excellence in securely fenced artistic and intellectual fields.

Over the past century or so, however, Canada has churned out an increasingly large number of celebrity artists and intellectuals. Its most prominent “thinkers” range all the way from the pioneering political economist Harold Adams Innis (1894-1952), Kennedy-era liberal icon John Kenneth Galbraith (1908-2006), media guru Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), literary theorist Northrop Frye (1912-1991), novelists Robertson Davies (1913-1995) and Margaret Atwood (b. 1939) and philosophers George Grant (1918-1988) and Charles Taylor (b. 1931), and songwriter-poet Leonard Cohen (1934-2016) all the way to contemporary, successfully self-promoting, right-wing media sensation Jordan Peterson (b. 1962—he of the passion for celebrating our “inner lobsters”) and Harvard University cognitive psychologist, linguist and popular science writer Steven Pinker (b. 1954). It even allowed a certifiably intellectual politician or two: most obviously Pierre Elliot Trudeau (1919-2000) and Michael Ignatieff (b. 1947)—successful and unsuccessful leaders respectively of Canada’s federal Liberal Party. Of the lot, Pinker is certainly possessed of the rosiest view of our species and its future. He portrays himself as a humanist and a progressive. He claims an intellectual heritage rooted in the European Enlightenment.

<p>None of us are as happy as we ought to be, given how amazing our world has become. People seem to bitch, moan, whine, carp and kvetch as much as ever. – Steven Pinker (Szailai, 2018)</p>

I have taken the opportunity to read most (and to review at least a few) of the sixteen books that the acclaimed Professor Pinker has published—particularly since he broadened his reach from the fields of visual cognition, psycholinguistics and the computational theory of mind (see: *The Language Instinct*, 2004; *How the Mind Works* 1997; *Words and Rules*, 1999; *The Blank Slate* 2002; and *The Stuff of Thought*, 2007). Over the last decade or so, he has begun to delve into more general areas of social commentary. His book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011) argued that the prevailing pessimism of people who view the future as one of imminent disaster

and devastation is ill-founded. With *Enlightenment Now*, he has doubled down on his apparent optimism and increased his hostility toward those who, in his opinion, worry excessively about the fate of the planet. In the past, I have tried to be balanced and occasionally quite positive about aspects of his previous publications. I find it harder to be as generous now.

In Pinker's view, it doesn't matter what particular dangers his intellectual adversaries—latter-day Edward Gibbons, Thomas Malthuses, and Oswald Spenglers, all—warn us about. The list of impending catastrophes is long and there is no shortage of archetypal Cassandras ready to point to imminent dangers of the decline and fall of Western Civilization (if not the entire biosphere or, as it is coming to be known, the anthroposphere. Among the large-scale hazards are: unsustainable human population growth and compensatory mass extinctions of other animal and plant species; related issues of climate change and consequent environmental degradation leading to ecological catastrophe; massive economic inequity and class conflict; global debt and financial collapse; violent clashes among various cultures and religions; chemical, biological and thermonuclear war; medical pandemics; cyberwarfare and the collapse of critical technologies; and societal implosion due to alienation and the experienced meaninglessness of human life in the wake of automation and the end of work.

<p>It's time to retire the morality play in which modern humans are a vile race of despoilers and plunderers who will hasten the apocalypse unless they undo the Industrial Revolution.</p> <p>– Steven Pinker, <i>Enlightenment Now</i></p>
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Nor does Pinker care if “doom-and-gloom” forecasters point to such perils as: mass addiction to licit and illicit drugs; universal anxiety, stress, mental diseases and disorders; technological tyranny in the existential abyss of the “post-human condition”; or the possibility that the far-famed 1% (of the 1% of the 1%) will just get tired of the inconveniences of democracy and human rights once and for all and move swiftly to impose a global corporatist totalitarianism facilitated by “big data analytics” and the pervasive surveillance of modern information technology.

The fact is, according to Pinker, that cultural pessimists are the victims of crafted strategies cunningly created by a host of villains including the sensationalist mass media and subversive academics and intellectuals who are allegedly besotted by neo-Marxism and postmodernism. He insists, instead, that the *evidence* regarding the state of the planet and humanity's place on it points in precisely the opposite direction. Individuals, he concedes, may have their ups and downs and whole societies may prosper or come upon hard times; but, for our species, while there is good reason to be prudent, there is no reason to panic. If anything, we should be generalizing the personalized mantra of French pharmacist and psychologist Émile Coué de la Châtaigneraie (1857-1926) and repeating to ourselves: “every day in every way [we are] getting better and better.”

The Children of the Enlightenment

Labels are slapped on historical eras, cultural ages, political ideologies, philosophical traditions and other composite and complicated ideas and sets of events chiefly for the purpose of reducing complexity to manageable generalizations. Medieval Europe, the Renaissance, the

Liberal tradition, and the Industrial Revolution all existed, of course, but the notion that they were monolithic, homogenous and uniform phenomena is absurd. They are rough designations created for expediency. People seeking to bookend the European Enlightenment within specific calendar years or to start with a notable person (perhaps Francis Bacon or René Descartes) and end with a date of a definitive event (possibly the French Revolution) may be able to squeeze pertinent data into an undergraduate history textbook or to frame a public lecture. They will not be referring to anything with real boundaries, but will only be marking off borders of convenience. xxx To claim authentic heritage as a child or the Enlightenment (and to exclude others from its legacy) or, more contestable still, to pretend to speak on behalf of the Enlightenment and to harbour the conceit that its chief ideas and ideals are best represented two or three hundred years later by your own beliefs and behaviour is an act of vanity worthy of a very large bonfire indeed. This, however, is what Steven Pinker does. He draws a line between some of the finest minds of the eighteenth century and a little before and pretends that his brief is submitted in support of their aims and aspirations, brought suitably up to date.

<p>Pinker portrays Enlightenment scholars who criticize <i>Enlightenment Now</i> as “cultural pessimists” averse to “Western civilization,” but this is hyperbolic and mostly wrong. – Aaron R. Hanlon, 2018</p>
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In Pinker’s world, the connection among reason, science, humanism and progress remains intact and clear. Moreover, he casts himself as an exemplar of the Enlightenment tradition who is battling bravely against individuals, organizations and ideologies that would pervert and subvert its noble goals. And, make no mistake, his inventory of villains is coherently and cogently constructed. He knows who the baddies are and is intent on exposing them.

The first problem with his agenda is that his understanding of the Enlightenment is superficial, shallow, self-contradictory and arguably quite wrong. He wants to lay claim to the golden book of science, reason, humanism and progress; but, he prefers not to open it. As historian of the French Enlightenment, David A. Bell (2018) shows, Pinker “does not engage in any serious analysis of Enlightenment authors, he avoids having to contend seriously with the awkward fact that by far the most popular of them, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, was a fierce critic of most forms of progress.” He also explains that, contrary to Pinker’s cheerful atheism, most Enlightenment figures from Isaac Newton on down were convinced monotheists or, at least, “Deists.” The difficulty, as Bell sees it, is that Pinker makes little effort to understand his antique heroes in context. He is retroactively imposing his twenty-first century perspective on people who had no way of sharing and would have surely opposed much of it.

Aside: although Pinker pretends to cherish Voltaire, I wonder if that charming old sceptic would regard Pinker as much more than a postmodern (so to speak) Peter Pangloss!

And, of course, as future President of the United States and long-time huckster for General Electric Ronald Reagan sonorously put it as host of the American television program, “GE Theatre in the late 1950s and early 1960s: “Remember, folks, at GE progress is our most important product.” The political economy of late capitalism and the ideology of technology are inseparable.

I use “the Enlightenment” as a handy rubric for that set of ideals [reason, science, and humanism] (since their most vehement and enduring expression can be found in that era). For all I know, if Voltaire or Leibniz or Kant stepped out of a time machine and commented on today’s political controversies, we’d think they were out to lunch. — Steven Pinker (Quillette, 2018)

Bell adds that Pinker has not just neglected to appreciate his subject, but he has also failed to live up to its rigorous standards. “The great writers of the Enlightenment ... were mostly skeptics at heart,” he says. “They had a taste for irony, an appreciation of paradox, and took delight in wit. They appreciated complexity, rarely shied away from difficulty, and generally had a deep respect for the learning of those who had preceded them.” Pinker, on the contrary, treats his purported forebears “with populist contempt.” His book has a “breezy style, bite-size chapters, and impressive visuals,” but it is basically an elongated TED talk—“a genre in which,” Bell reminds us, “Pinker has copious experience.” This is not the complaint of a curmudgeonly scholar who lacks experience in cutting-edge communications technologies. It is the criticism of an able historian who knows “an oversimplified, excessively optimistic vision of human history and a starkly technocratic prescription for the human future” when he reads one.

Culture Wars Redux

Pinker’s second problem is with his data. He presents reams of information in seventy-five attractive (or “jaw-dropping” according to his publicists) graphs all of which provide evidence that human life has improved since the eighteenth century. He demonstrates that “life, health, prosperity, safety, peace, knowledge and happiness are on the rise, not just in the West, but worldwide.” This progress, he assures us, “is not the result of some cosmic force. It is a gift of the Enlightenment: the conviction that reason and science can enhance human flourishing.”

But who doubts it? If aggregate data is collected and selectively presented, then who can deny that there have been material advances over the past few centuries? The keyboard I am using is connected to a communication system that I do not pretend to understand, but I know that by pressing a couple of keys, I can deliver this (pre-publication) manuscript for constructive criticism to colleagues in New Zealand, Hawai’i, Colorado, Ohio and England in microseconds. More importantly (for me personally), in the absence of modern surgical techniques and innovative medicines, the fingers which I am using would long since have rotted in my grave after the effects of previously terminal illnesses that were diagnosed and treated in 1951, 1963, 2001, 2008 and 2015. (Note to friends: I seem to be doing fine ... so far.)

True, in the wake of World War II (not, presumably, part of the “Enlightenment project”) the horrific discoveries at the Nazi death camps gave some people pause. T. W. Adorno, for example, was so horrified that he temporarily expressed the view that, after Auschwitz, the writing of poetry would be barbaric. Together with his Frankfurt School colleague, Max Horkheimer (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972), he even tried to connect the Enlightenment to the Holocaust, arguing that the dominance of science and technology over morality and the quest for domination over human and non-human nature through “instrumental reasoning” had made genocide not only technologically possible, but ethically acceptable. To take this example and

build a notion of a vast conspiracy among “elites” and “intellectuals” dedicated to undoing progress is, however, a canard.

As well, while I do not want to accuse Pinker of fabricating evidence or making “fake news”, his claim that CO² emissions have decreased per dollar of GDP since 1980 disguises the fact that such emissions have increased immensely in absolute numbers even though decreasing in “intensity” in comparison with economic growth. What, moreover, are we to make of the joyful news that deaths by lightning strikes have declined, other than that most people now live in urban, nor rural, environments? Similarly, his reassurance that there has been an increase in protection for animals and their habitat does nothing to counter the fact that we are experiencing perhaps the greatest extermination of plant and animal species since the dinosaurs took their leave over sixty million years ago (Guilhot, 2018). After all, an increase in the purchase of domestic burglar alarm systems is not necessarily evidence that the frequency of home invasions has gone down.

What Pinker is doing, however, is more than distorting data to present a biased case; he is inventing caricatures of purported enemies of the Enlightenment who pose a threat to the achievements of Western Civilization and want to destroy it.

<p>Pinker's monsterring of Marxists and feminists is likely to reduce most university common-rooms to states of gibbering apoplexy ... By vilifying opponents, and sneering at half the academic world, he will worsen, not improve matters. – Robin McKie, 2002</p>
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Pinker has long fabricated political attacks on others, claiming they were Marxists. His favourite target was the wonderful evolutionary scientists Stephen Jay Gould, whom Pinker relentlessly castigated prior to Gould’s premature death in 2002. Now, he has helped combine “neo-Marxism” and “postmodernism” (two wholly incompatible philosophies) and made their bizarre conflation his main target in an effort to resuscitate the “culture wars” that infected academia in the 1980s. *Enlightenment Now* is his most sustained effort in this direction to date.

Now, it seems, he and his somewhat less impressive ideological soul-mate, psychologist Jordan Peterson, are engaged not so much in a fight against subversives (they are both inordinately disturbed not only by alleged Marxists and literary postmodernists, but also by anyone and all critics of patriarchy, corporate capitalism, imperialism and racism). They not only display a profound ignorance of Marxism, postmodernism (or both), but they fail to see that an extraordinarily good case can be made for the proposition that it was Karl Marx who was a more consistent heir of the enlightenment and a complete modernist.

Why Does It Matter?

Steven Pinker can be understood at least partially as a partisan of “science” in the hoary old debate made popular by C. P. Snow in the 1950s between the two cultures of science and the humanities (called, perhaps ironically, “humanists” at the time). He is certainly contemptuous of people in the “humanities” and also of many social scientists who, he believes, are not *real* scientists but interlopers sailing under false flags. He, like Peterson, seems convinced that it is the

interpretive, soft studies of literature, history, sociology and the like that are not only untrustworthy for their lack of scientific rigour, but are also dangerous in that they seek to undo all the good that has been done by the “Enlightenment project” and that their sloppy habits of thought make them susceptible to subjectivism, metaphysical delusions, subversive ideologies and demagoguery in all its forms. As a result, he and likeminded scientists have not only an academic, but a moral and a political duty to reveal these charlatans and restore Enlightenment practices and precepts.

Most of the activists and cultural critics Pinker accuses of “morose cultural pessimism” don’t think that things don’t get better. It’s rather that they are legitimately angry about what happens when the polluters, invaders, and wealth hoarders who stand to gain from making them worse do get their way.

– James A. Smith, 2018

Aaron Hanlon (2018) agrees that “we still have ‘two cultures,’ [but he is adamant that Pinker is] wrong about which one is dominant today. Higher learning is very much a corporate enterprise. Funding is plentiful for so-called STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) programs. Students are encouraged to seek “practical” knowledge and acquire “employability skills.” Vocationalism is pervasive as the Humanities struggle for survival. If a few programs in “women’s studies,” “race and ethnic studies,” “postcolonialism” and the like survive to annoy the hegemonic STEM programs, as well as the “professions” such as law and medicine or the ballooning programs in marketing, finance, human resources and business administration, they are largely evidence of what Herbert Marcuse once called “repressive tolerance,” examples of despised disciplines kept alive to demonstrate that dissent is alive and well in the academy.

So, the Pinkers and Petersons of this world might better be considered as carrying out a “mop-up” operation against the remains of the “radical counterculture of the 1960s” than a desperate fight for control on the corporate university a half-century later. The false fight, however, is not to be dismissed.

Efforts on the part of Steven Pinker, Jordan Peterson and others such as the late Hans Rosling are immensely effective. For example, Gosling’s *Factfulness* (Whitford, 2018) won the gushing praise of Bill and Melinda Gates. Like many of the Gates’ acts of generosity, their “gifting” of a copy of *Factfulness* to every student who won an Associate’s Bachelor’s or Postgraduate degree from an American college or university in the Spring of 2018. won them praise for their selfless benevolence generosity and, like most of their philanthropic initiatives, it also allowed them to win public adulation while using their vast wealth to pre-empt public policy by weaponizing *Factfulness* against the forces of “neo-Marxist postmodernism” in the intellectual marketplace and securing tax advantages in the bargain. Peterson, meanwhile, has become the intellectual darling of Fox News and the social media and has captivated millions with his self-help book, *12 Rules for Life* (2018) that has, among other things, been described as a “verbal waterboarding of big government” (Jamieson, 2018) and a rehashing of discredited Jungian archetypes blended with an absurd demonization of the oxymoronic bogeyman, “neo-Marxist postmodernism” to produce a form of “fascist mysticism” bundled with “populism” to create a unique addendum to Cold War demagoguery and a “reactionary ... loathing ... for social justice warriors” (Mishra, 2018).

Combined with *Enlightenment Now*, the message of these tracts will not be lost on American voters. They present an attractive argument and deploy apparently sound empirical data. They do not utterly ignore, but they do marginalize inconvenient information, and they finesse the main problems that confront humanity and the planet.

Steven Pinker doesn't just want you to be happy; he wants you to be grateful too. *Enlightenment Now* is a spirited and exasperated rebuke to anyone who refuses to concede that the world is becoming a better place.

– Jennifer Szailai, 2018

Yes, there are alarming data that reveal that the majority of wealth in the United States, Canada and the world is owned or controlled by a tiny handful of humanity. But, there is also evidence that a significant number of poorest of the poor are no longer suffering in the most dreadful poverty ... starvation seems to be declining, smallpox has been effectively eradicated.

Yes, the balance of terror based on the MAD theory of mutually assured destruction seems in jeopardy, especially given the possibilities of further nuclear proliferation and the recent death of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and so on. But, there has also not been a major armed encounter between the major powers since two atom bombs incinerated Hiroshima and Nagasaki almost seventy-five years ago.

And, yes, there are some nagging question concerning climate change, fossil fuels, oceanic pollution, desertification, extreme weather and maybe even geological activity due to fracking. But optimists such as Steven Pinker and Bill Gates are confident that further technological innovation will render those concerns obsolete before it's too late, which should be in about twelve years, according to the scientific community which Pinker so eloquently praises (IPCC, 2018).

Lest I be predissmissed as a pessimist, never mind a neo-Marxist postmodernist, I shall give the last comforting words to Jennifer Szailai (2018) who has tempered her criticism with compassion and a degree of tolerance that Steven Pinker seems disinclined to show his adversaries. She writes:

There's a noble kernel to Pinker's project. He wants to discourage the kind of fatalism that leads people to think the only way forward is to tear everything down. But he seems surprisingly blind to how he fuels such fatalism by playing to the worst stereotype of the enlightened cosmopolitan: disdainful and condescending—sympathetic to humanity in the abstract but impervious to the suffering of actual human beings.

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“From Critical Theory to Critical Practice: The Case of a Singular College Strike,” in H. C. X. Wang, ed., *Critical Theory and Transformative Learning* (IGI Global, 2018); “Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy in an Era of ‘Permanent Crisis’ in Postsecondary Education,” in B. Campbell, B. Hunter & L. McNutt, eds., *Postsecondary Education in Transition* (Dublin Institute of Technology, 2017); “The Novelist as Anthropologist,” in M. Tuzi, ed., *Canadian Writers Series: Nino Ricci* (Guernica Editions, 2016); and “Canadian Responses to Terrorism: Attitudes and Actions,” in T. Fleming & P. O’Reilly, eds., *Violence in Canadian Society: An Anthology of Readings* (de Sitter Press, 2016). He can be reached at howard_doughty@post.com

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