

## THE LIBERTARIAN QUEST FOR A GRAND HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

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*ABSTRACT:* The greatest challenge for libertarians, whether economic or otherwise, is to develop a grand historical narrative that is to counter and correct the so-called Whig theory of history that all ruling elites, everywhere and at all times, have tried to sell to the public: that is the view, that we live in the best of all times and that the grand sweep of history, notwithstanding some ups *and* downs, has been one of more or less steady progress. This Whig theory of history, despite some setbacks motivated in particular by the experiences of the two disastrous world wars during the first half of the twentieth century, has again become predominant in the public mind. But while the present democratic social order may be the technologically most advanced civilization, it most certainly is not the most advanced socially. In fact, by some measures it falls far behind the Middle Ages. The principal counterstrategy of *recivilization* must be a return to “normality” by means of decentralization. The process of territorial expansion that went hand in hand with the centralization of all authority in one monopolistic hand must be reversed. The paper concludes with comments on Steven Pinker’s attempt to rescue the Whig theory of history and demonstrate that we live in the best of all worlds—an attempt which is in fact an utter failure.

“To historians is granted a talent that even the gods are denied—to alter what has already happened!” (*David Irving*)

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## INTRODUCTION

It is no secret that I am not a Hayekian. Still, I consider Hayek a great economist—not in the same league as Mises, but few if any economists are. Hayek’s fame in the public mind, however, has less to do with his economic writings but stems largely from his writings in political theory, and it is in this area that I consider him mostly deficient. Not even his system of definitions here is internally consistent. His excursions into the field of epistemology are quite ingenious, yet here he also falls short of the accomplishments of his teacher Mises. Nonetheless, owing to his wide-ranging interdisciplinary oeuvre, which contains a treasure trove of keen insights into many issues, I consider Hayek one of the twentieth century’s outstanding intellectuals writing in the social sciences.

As a reflection of this esteem, Hayek was also quoted in the programmatic statement of the Property and Freedom Society.

We must make the building of a free society once more an intellectual adventure, a deed of courage. What we lack is a liberal Utopia, a programme which seems neither a mere defence of things as they are nor a diluted kind of socialism, but a truly liberal radicalism which does not spare the susceptibilities of the mighty..., which is not too severely practical and which does not confine itself to what appears today as politically possible. We need intellectual leaders who are prepared to resist the blandishments of power and influence and who are willing to work for an ideal, however small may be the prospects of its early realization. They must be men who are willing to stick to principles and to fight for their full realization, however remote.... Unless we can make the philosophical foundations of a free society once more a living intellectual issue, and its implementation a task which challenges the ingenuity and imagination of our liveliest minds, the prospects of freedom are indeed dark. But if we can regain that belief in the power of ideas which was the mark of liberalism at its best, the battle is not lost.

Hayek of course did not follow his own advice, but ended up, in his political philosophy, with a mishmash full of internally inconsistent compromises. Yet this does not mean that his plea for an uncompromising intellectual radicalism, which has been the purpose and become the hallmark of the PFS, is not worthwhile or correct.

But this shall not be my topic here. Rather, I want to speak about another important, if complementary, insight of Hayek’s that can be found in the introduction he wrote for the collection of essays gathered in *Capitalism and the Historians*. Here, Hayek makes the

point that although uncompromising intellectual radicalism is necessary as a source of energy and inspiration for the leaders of a liberal-libertarian movement, this is not sufficient to make for public appeal. Because the general public is not used to or capable of abstract reasoning, high theory, and intellectual consistency, but forms its political views and convictions on the basis of historical narratives, i.e., of prevailing interpretations of past events, it is upon those who want to change things for a better, liberal-libertarian future to challenge and correct such interpretations and propose and promote alternative, revisionist historical narratives.

Let me quote from Hayek to this effect:

While the events of the past are the source of the experience of the human race, their opinions are determined not by the objective facts but by the records and interpretations to which they have access.... Historical myths have perhaps played nearly as great a role in shaping opinion as historical facts.... The influence which the writers of history thus exercise on public opinion is probably more immediate and extensive than that of the political theorists who launch new ideas. It seems as though even such new ideas reach wider circles usually not in their abstract form but as the interpretations of particular events. The historian is in this respect at least one step nearer to direct power over public opinion than is the theorist.... Most people, when being told that their political convictions have been affected by particular views on economic history, will answer that they never have been interested in it and never have read a book on the subject. This, however, does not mean that they do not, with the rest, regard as established facts many of the legends which at one time or another have been given currency by writers on economic history. (Hayek 1954, 3–8)

The central theme of *Capitalism and the Historians* is the revision of the still popular myth that it was the system of free market capitalism, at the beginning of the so-called Industrial Revolution, around the early 1800s, which has been responsible for the economic misery that caused even little children to have to work for sixteen hours or more under atrocious conditions in mines or similarly uncomfortable workplaces, and that it was only due to the pressure of labor unions and government intervention in the economy by way of so-called social policy means and measures that this “inhumane” system of “capitalist exploitation” was gradually overcome and improved.

When first hearing this sad story, one would think that the immediate question coming to mind should be: Why would any parent subject his child to such a treatment and hand him over to

some evil capitalist exploiters? Did these children have a jolly good time before, strolling around in meadows and fields, healthy and with red cheeks, picking flowers, eating apples off the trees, fishing and swimming in creeks, rivers, and lakes, playing with their toys and attentively listening to their grandparents' tales? In that case, what horrible people must these parents have been! Merely asking these questions should be sufficient to realize that this story *cannot* be true. And in fact, as Hayek and his collaborators demonstrated, it is just about the opposite of the truth.

Until the Industrial Revolution, England and the rest of the world, for thousands of years, had lived under Malthusian conditions. That is, the supply of consumer goods provided by nature and by human production through means of intermediate tools and producer goods was not sufficient to ensure the survival of a growing population. Population growth exceeded the growth of production and any increases in productivity; hence, not only in England, but everywhere, an "excess" of population regularly had to die off due to malnutrition, ill health, and ultimately starvation. It was only with and since the Industrial Revolution that this situation fundamentally changed and the Malthusian trap was successively overcome, first in England, then in continental Europe and the European overseas dependencies, and finally also in much of the rest of the world, so as to allow not only for a steadily growing population, but one with continuously rising material standards of living. And this momentous achievement was the result of free market capitalism, or more precisely a combination and interplay of three factors. For one, the general security of private property; second, low time preference, i.e., the ability and willingness of a growing number of people to delay immediate gratification so as to save for the future and accumulate an ever larger stock of capital goods; and third, the intelligence and ingenuity of a sufficient number of people to invent and engineer a steady stream of new productivity-enhancing tools and machines.

The parents of the poor children, who handed them over to the "evil capitalists" during the Industrial Revolution were not bad parents, then, but like most parents everywhere who want the best for their children, they chose to do so, because they preferred their children alive, even if it was a miserable life, rather than dead. Contrary to still popular myth in leftist circles, then, capitalism did not cause misery, but literally saved countless millions of people from death

by starvation and gradually lifted them from their previous state of abject poverty. Labor unions' and governments' so-called social policies did not help in this regard, but hampered and retarded this process of gradual economic improvement, and were and still are responsible for countless numbers of unnecessary deaths.

There are many other related myths, equally or even more absurd, propagated by, to use Nicholas Taleb's label, IYIs (intellectuals yet idiots) and widely believed by the general public: that you can legislate greater economic prosperity by simply passing minimum wage laws, or else that economic misery can be overcome by simply increasing monetary spending.—But why, then, not legislate hourly wage rates of \$100 or \$1000, and why, then, is India, for instance, still a poor country? Are the ruling elites in India too dumb to know about this magic formula? —Why, then, since everywhere nowadays governments can easily increase the quantity of paper money in practically unlimited amounts, is there still any poor person around?

Nor are such faulty historical narratives restricted only to economic history. Rather, much of what we have learned as the established truth from our standard history books about World War I and World War II, about the American and the French Revolutions, about Hitler, Churchill, FDR or Napoleon, and on and on and on, also turns out to be faulty history—facts mixed in, whether intentionally or not, with hefty doses of fiction, and fake.

Important as the revision of all these myths is, however, the greatest challenge for libertarians, whether economic or otherwise, is to develop a grand historical narrative that is to counter and correct the so-called Whig theory of history that all ruling elites, everywhere and at all times, have tried to sell to the public: that is the view, that we live in the best of all times (and that *they* are the ones who will guarantee that this stays so) and that the grand sweep of history, notwithstanding some ups *and* downs, has been one of more or less steady progress. This Whig theory of history, despite some setbacks motivated in particular by the experiences of the two disastrous world wars during the first half of the twentieth century, has again become predominant in the public mind, as indicated by the success of such books as Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) or, still more recently, Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011) and *Enlightenment Now* (2018).

According to the proponents of this theory, what makes the present age so great and qualifies it as the best of all times is the combination of two factors: for one, never before in human history have technology and the natural sciences reached as high a level of development and have the average material living standards been as high as today— which appears essentially correct and which fact without doubt contributes greatly to the public appeal and acceptance of the Whig theory. Secondly, never before in history have people supposedly experienced as much freedom as today with the development of “liberal democracy” or “democratic capitalism”— which claim, despite its widespread popularity, I consider a historical myth. In fact, since the degree of freedom and of economic and technological development are indeed positively correlated, this leads me to the conclusion that average material living standards would have been even higher than they presently are if history only had taken a different course.

But before offering an alternative, grand revisionist historical narrative and indicating where Pinker and his ilk go off the rails with their Whiggish world history, a few remarks on the history of *science* are in order. Until relatively recently, the belief in a steady growth of *science*, if nothing else, has never been much in doubt— until the early 1960s, with the historian of science Thomas Kuhn and his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). Kuhn, in contrast to the orthodox Whig-ish view on the matter, portrayed the development of science not so much as a continuous march upward and into the light, but rather as a sequence of “paradigm shifts” that followed each other much like—directionless—one lady-fashion follows another. The book became a huge success and for quite some time Kuhn’s view became a widespread fashion in philosophical circles. Kuhn notwithstanding, however, I still regard the traditional view concerning the development of science as essentially correct. The central error of Kuhn as well as of many philosophers of science—revealingly expressed again and again, for instance, by Sheldon Cooper, the super science nerd—theoretical physicist character in the hugely popular TV series *The Big Bang Theory*—lies in a fundamental misconception regarding the interrelation between science on the one hand and engineering or technology on the other.

This is the popular misconception of science as coming before, having priority over, and assuming a higher rank and dignity

vis-à-vis engineering and technology as only secondary and inferior intellectual enterprises, i.e., as mere “applied” science. In fact, however, matters are exactly the other way around. What comes methodologically first, and what makes science as we know it at all possible and at the same time provides its ultimate foundation, is human engineering and construction. Put plainly and bluntly: without such purposefully designed and constructed instruments as measuring rods, clocks, planes, rectangles, scales, counters, lenses, microscopes, telescopes, audiometers, thermometers, spectrometers, x-ray and ultrasound machines, particle accelerators, and on and on, no empirical and experimental science as we know it would be possible. Or to put it in the words of the great late German philosopher-scientist Peter Janich: “Handwerk” comes before and provides the stable foundation and groundwork of “Mundwerk.” Whatever controversies or quibbles scientists may have, they are always controversies and quibbles within a stable operational framework and reference system defined by a given state of technology. And in the field of human engineering, no one would ever throw out or “falsify” a working instrument until and unless he had another, better working instrument available.

Hence, it is engineering and advances in engineering that make science and scientific progress possible and at the same time prevent from happening that which Karl Popper’s “falsificationist” philosophy of science that currently dominates intellectual public opinion must admit as “always possible”: not only scientific *regression* but even the complete breakdown of our entire system of knowledge due to the supposedly “always possible” falsification of even its seemingly most basic hypotheses. What prevents this nightmare from happening and what exposes both Kuhn’s relativism and Popper’s related falsificationism as involving an elementary methodological error is the existence of “Handwerk” and its methodical priority and primacy over the mere “Mundwerk” of science.

(Note: I am not denying here the possibility of periods of regression in the development of science. But I would explain any such regression as the consequence of a prior loss of practical engineering knowledge. “Harmlessly” in the normal course of economic development, certain skills may die out and be forgotten, because there is no longer any demand for their products. This does not necessarily imply a step back in engineering knowledge, however.



Indeed, such loss can be more than made up by the development of different skills required for the manufacturing of different, more highly demanded products. Loss here is the springboard of technological progress. Old tools and machines are replaced by better new ones. But another, less “harmless” development is possible as well, and has indeed taken place at certain times and places. Due to a pestilence, for instance, the population size, and with it also the division of labor, might dramatically shrink and lead to a huge and widespread loss of accumulated engineering knowledge and skills, so as to require a return to earlier and more primitive modes of production. Or a population might simply become less bright, for whatever reason, than its forebears and unable to maintain a given (inherited) level of technological advancement.)

With this out of the way, I can now turn to the *fake* part of the Whig theory of history—concerning *social* history. Although it is comparatively easy to diagnose technological progress, and along with this also scientific progress (progress occurs whenever we learn how to successfully accomplish some additional, quicker, or better result in our purposeful dealings with the nonhuman world of material objects, plants, and animals), it is significantly more difficult to define and diagnose *social* progress, i.e., progress in *interpersonal* dealings or *man-to-man* interactions.

To do this, it is first necessary to define a model of *social perfection* that is in accordance with human nature, i.e., of men as they really are, which can serve as a reference system to diagnose the relative proximity or distance of various historical events, periods, and developments to this ideal. And this definition of social perfection and social progress must be strictly separate, independent, and analytically distinct from the definition of technological and scientific growth and perfection (even if both progress or growth dimensions are empirically positively correlated). Conceptually, that is, it must be allowed that there can be societies that are (near) perfect socially but technologically backward, as well as societies that are technologically highly advanced and yet socially backward.

For the libertarian, this ideal of social perfection is *peace*, i.e., a normally tranquil and frictionless person-to-person interaction—and a peaceful resolution of occasional conflict—within the stable framework of private or several (mutually exclusive) property and property rights. I do not want to appeal only to libertarians with this, however, but to a potentially universal, or “catholic,”



audience, because the same ideal of social perfection is essentially also the one prescribed by the ten biblical commandments.

Setting the first four commandments aside, which refer to our relation to God as the one and only ultimate moral authority and the final judge of our earthly conduct and the proper celebration of the Sabbath, the rest, referring to worldly affairs, display a deep and profoundly libertarian spirit.

5. Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may be well with you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you.
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife; and you shall not desire your neighbor's house, his field, his male servant, his female servant, his ox, his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.

Some libertarians may argue that not all of these commandments have the same rank or status. They may point out, for instance, that the fifth and the seventh commandments are not on a par and of the same dignity as the sixth, eighth, and tenth commandments; that this may also be the case with commandment nine, prohibiting libel; or that desiring another's wife or servant is not on a par with coveting his house or field. However, the Ten Commandments do not say anything about the *severity* and suitable *punishment* of violations of its various commands. They proscribe all mentioned activities and desires, but they leave open the question of how severely any of them deserves to be punished.

In this, the biblical commandments go above and beyond what many libertarians regard as sufficient for the establishment of a peaceful social order: the mere strict adherence to commandments six, eight, and ten. Yet this difference between a strict and rigid libertarianism and the ten biblical commandments does not imply any incompatibility between the two. Both are in complete harmony if only a distinction is made between legal prohibitions on the one hand, expressed in commandments six, eight, and ten, violations of which may be punished by the exercise of physical violence, and

extralegal or moral prohibitions on the other hand, expressed in commandments five, seven, and nine, violations of which may be punished only by means below the threshold of physical violence, such as social disapproval, discrimination, exclusion, or ostracism. Indeed, thus interpreted the full six mentioned commandments can be recognized as even an improvement over a strict and rigid libertarianism—*given* the common, shared goal of social perfection: of a stable, just, and peaceful social order.

For surely any society of people who habitually disrespect their parents and routinely mock the idea of natural ranks and hierarchies of social authority, which underlies the institution of the family; who pooh-pooh the institution of marriage and cavalierly regard adultery as inconsequential, faultless, or even liberating; or who habitually scoff at the idea of personal honor and honesty and routinely or even gleefully engage in libelous activity, i.e., the practice of “bearing false witness against one’s neighbor”—any such society will quickly disintegrate into a group of people ceaselessly disturbed by social strife and conflict rather than enjoying enduring and lasting peace.

Taking this biblical-libertarian ideal of social perfection as a benchmark, then, the next step in our argument must be the *diagnosis*, i.e., the comparative evaluation and ranking of various historical periods and developments regarding their relative proximity or distance to this ultimate, ideal goal.

In this regard, immediately a first diagnosis concerning the contemporary world impresses itself. Even if we may grant that the dominant Western model of “liberal democracy” or “democratic capitalism” comes closer to the ideal than the models of social organization presently followed elsewhere, outside the so-called Western world, it still falls glaringly short of the ideal. Indeed, it explicitly and unequivocally contradicts and violates the “Catholic” biblical commandments, and the proponents and promoters of this model, then, manifestly (even if not admittedly) deny and oppose God’s will and turn out advocates of the devil instead.

For one, even with the greatest intellectual contortions it is impossible to derive the institution of a state from these commandments. If no one may steal, murder, or desire another person’s property, then no institution that may steal, murder, and desire another person’s property can ever be permitted to come into existence. Yet like all other societies today, all present

Western societies are societies with *states*, which may routinely steal (tax), murder (go to war), and covet other people's property (legislate). Moreover, in Western *democratic* state societies in particular, the moral sin of desiring another man's property is not only *not* strictly and universally outlawed (but routinely put in practice), but this sin is actually promoted and "cultivated" to its utmost—devilish—extreme. With democratic elections installed as the centerpiece of social life, everyone is "liberated" from God's commandment and made "free" to desire whatever he wants of the property of others and to express his immoral desires through regular anonymous votes.

Surely, this liberal-democratic model of social organization cannot be the end of history, neither for a libertarian nor for anyone taking the biblical commandments to heart. Indeed, Fukuyama's (1992) claim to the contrary borders on the blasphemous.

Regardless of how disastrous the diagnosis of the contemporary world turns out to be, however, it might still be the case that the present state of affairs represents some sort of progress. It might not be the *end* of history, but it might be a closer approximation to the goal of social perfection than anything historically preceding it. To refute the Whig theory of history in its entirety, then, it is further necessary to identify some earlier (and thus, naturally, technologically less advanced) society that adhered more closely to the biblical commandments and came nearer to social perfection. And so as to carry any weight in public debate (in the battle of rival historical narratives), the counterexample in question should be a "big" one. That is, it should not be only a short time span in some tiny place, but a large-scale and long-lasting historical phenomenon. And for the same reason of potential popular appeal, the example should be connected, both geographically and genealogically, as a historical predecessor to the contemporary Western model of democratic state societies, and it should not lie too far in the dark and distant past.

In my own attempts at offering a revisionist account of Western history—in particular in my two books *Democracy: The God That Failed* (2001) and *A Short History of Man* (2015)—I have identified the European Middle Ages, or what is sometimes also and better referred to as Latin Christendom—the roughly thousand-year period from the fall of Rome until the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century—as such an example. Not perfect in many ways, but

closer to the ideal of social perfection than anything that followed it, and in particular closer than the present democratic order.

Not surprisingly, this is also the very period in Western history that our current—godless—democratic rulers and their court historians have chosen to portray in the darkest of terms. In Greek and Roman society, they can see some “good” and value, even if it supposedly lags far behind the level of social advancement reached with the contemporary democratic social order. But the Middle Ages are routinely portrayed as dark, cruel, and filled with superstition, best forgotten and ignored in all of standard history and historical narrative.

Why this particularly unfavorable treatment of the Middle Ages? Because, as many historians, old and contemporary, have of course noticed too, the Middle Ages represents a large-scale and long-lasting historical example of a stateless society and as such represents the polar opposite of the present, statist social order. Indeed, the Middle Ages, notwithstanding its many imperfections, can be identified as a God-pleasing—a *gott-gefällige*—social order, whereas the present democratic state order, notwithstanding its numerous achievements, stands in constant violation of God’s commandments and must be identified as a satanic order. To answer the question, then, Satan and his earthly followers will of course go all out to make us ignore and forget about God and belittle, besmirch, and denigrate everything and anything that shows His hand.

This is all the more reason for any libertarian and God-pleasing “Catholic” to study and draw inspiration from this historical period of the European Middle Ages—something, incidentally, made easier nowadays and likely to encounter little opposition from the powers that be and their increasingly rigorously enforced speech code of “political correctness,” because any such study has long since been relegated to the status of a nerdy, quaint, and exotic interest, far distant in time from the present and without any contemporary relevance.

In standard (orthodox) history we are told, as a quasi-axiomatic truth, that the institution of the state is necessary and indispensable for the maintenance of social peace. The study of the Middle Ages and Latin Christendom shows that this is untrue, a historical myth, and how, for a lengthy historical period, peace was successfully maintained without a state and thus without open renunciation of libertarian and biblical precepts.

Although many libertarians fancy an anarchic social order as a largely horizontal order without hierarchies and different ranks of authority—as “antiauthoritarian”—the medieval example of a stateless society teaches otherwise. Peace was not maintained by the absence of hierarchies and ranks of authority, but by the absence of anything but *social* authority and *ranks* of social authority. Indeed, in contrast to the present order, which essentially recognizes only *one* authority, that of the state, the Middle Ages were characterized by a great multitude of competing, cooperating, overlapping and hierarchically ordered ranks of social authority. There was the authority of the heads of family households and of various kinship groups. There were patrons, lords, overlords, feudal kings with their estates, their vassals, and the vassals of vassals. There were countless different and separate communities and towns, and a huge variety of religious, artistic, professional, and social orders, councils, assemblies, guilds, associations, and clubs, each with its own rules, hierarchies and rank orders. In addition, and of utmost importance, there were the authorities of the local priest, the more distant bishop, and of the Pope in Rome.

But no authority was absolute, and no one person or group of people held a monopoly on its position or rank of authority. The hierarchical feudal lord-vassal relationship, for instance, was not indissoluble. It could be broken if either side violated the provisions of the fealty oaths they both had sworn to uphold. Nor was the relationship between lord and vassal a transitive one. That is, the lord of a vassal was not on account of his lordship also the lord of all his vassal’s vassals. Indeed, such vassals could be tied to a different lord, or they could, elsewhere and regarding other things, be lords themselves, which precluded any involvement in their affairs in question. It was thus near impossible for anyone to exercise any straight top-down authority and hence also immensely difficult in particular to raise and maintain a large standing army and engage in large-scale or even continent-wide war. That is, the phenomenon which we have come to regard as perfectly normal today, that a command that is directly binding on all of society is given from the top on down, from its highest ranks down to the lowliest, was absent in the Middle Ages. Authority was widely dispersed, and any one person or position of authority was constrained and kept in check by another. Even feudal kings, bishops, and indeed even the Pope himself could be called upon and brought to justice by other competing authorities.

“Feudal law” reflected this “hierarchic-anarchic” social structure of the Middle Ages. All of law was essentially *private* law (i.e., law applying to persons and person-to-person interactions), all of litigation was between a personal defendant and a personal plaintiff, and punishment typically involved the payment of some specified material compensation by the offender to his victim or his lawful successor. However, this central characteristic of the Middle Ages as a historical model of a private law society did not mean that feudal law was some sort of unitary, coherent, and consistent legal *system*. To the contrary, feudal law allowed for a great variety of locally and regionally different laws and customs, and the difference in the treatment of similar offences in different localities could be quite drastic. Yet at the same time, with the Catholic Church and the Scholastic teachings of the natural law, there was an overarching institutional framework and moral reference system in place to serve as a morally unifying force, constraining and moderating the range of variation between the laws of different localities.

Needless to say, there were many imperfections that future historians, to this day, would focus on and highlight so as to discredit the entire period. During the Middle Ages, under the influence of Catholic Church, the institution of slavery, which had been a dominant feature of Greek and Roman society, had been increasingly discredited and pushed back to near extinction, but it had not entirely disappeared. As well, the institution of serfdom, from a moral point of view “better” than slavery but still not without moral blemish, was yet a widespread social phenomenon. Moreover, plenty of small-scale wars and feuds took place during the entire period. And as we are never allowed to forget: the punishments dished out in various law courts for various offences here or there, were sometimes (for modern sensibilities, in any case) extreme, harsh, and cruel. A murderer might be hung or beheaded, quartered, burnt, boiled, or drowned. A thief might have his finger or hand cut off and a false witness his tongue torn out. An adulteress might be stoned, a rapist castrated, and a “witch” burnt.

It is these features in particular that we are told in standard history to associate with the Middle Ages so as to arouse our moral indignation and feel elated about our own enlightened present. Even if all true, however, any such exclusive concentration on

these features as a distinctive characteristic of the Middle Ages is to miss the mark, or the wood for the trees. It takes accidents for nature and what is natural and normal. That is, it ignores, whether deliberately or not, the central characteristic of the entire period: the fact that it was a stateless social order with widely dispersed, hierarchically ordered, and rivaling centers of authority. And this focus then conveniently closes the eyes to the fact that the “excesses” of the Middle Ages actually pale in comparison to those of the present democratic state order, for surely slavery and serfdom have not disappeared in the democratic world. Rather, some increasingly rare “private” slavery and serfdom have been replaced by a near-universal system of “public” tax slavery and serfdom. As well, wars have not disappeared, but only become of a larger scale. And as for excessive punishments and witch hunts, they have not gone away either. To the contrary, they have multiplied. Enemies of the state are tortured in the same old gruesome or even technically “refined” ways. Moreover, countless people who are *not* murderers, thieves, libelers, adulterers, or rapists, i.e., people who live in complete accordance with the ten biblical commandments and once would have been left alone, are nonetheless routinely punished today, up to the level of lengthy incarceration or the loss of their entire property. Witches are no longer called that, but with just one sole authority in place, the “identification” of anyone as a “suspect of evil-doing” or a “troublemaker” is greatly facilitated, and the number of people so identified has accordingly multiplied; and although such suspects are no longer burnt at the stake, they are routinely punished by up to lifelong economic deprivation, unemployment, poverty, or even starvation. And while the primary purpose of punishment was once restitution, i.e., the offender had to compensate the victim, the primary purpose of punishment today is submission—the offender must compensate and satisfy not the victim, but the state (thus victimizing the victim twice).

With this we can state a first conclusion. The present democratic social order may be the technologically most advanced civilization, but it most certainly is not the most advanced socially. As measured by biblical-libertarian standards of social perfection, it falls far behind the Middle Ages. Indeed, as measured by those standards, the transition in European history from the anarchic medieval to the modern statist world is nothing less than the transition from a God-pleasing to a godless social order.



At various places, in the most condensed form in my essay *From Aristocracy to Monarchy to Democracy* (2014), I have analyzed and tried to reconstruct this process of *decivilization*, which has by now been going on for half a millennium, and to explain the calamitous and deleterious consequences and ramifications that it has had for the development of law and economics. I shall not repeat or recapitulate any of this here. Rather, I only want to shed some light on the principal strategy that all statist, from the late Middle Ages on until today, have pursued to reach their statist ends, so as to also gain (if only indirectly) some insight into any possible counterstrategy that could lead us out of the current predicament. Not back to the Middle Ages, of course, because too many permanent and irreversible changes have taken place since, both in regard to our mental and our material conditions and capacities, but to a new society that takes its cues from the study of the Middle Ages and understands and knows of the principal reason for its demise.

The strategy was dictated by the quasi-libertarian, stateless medieval starting point, and it suggested itself “naturally,” first and foremost to the top ranks of social authority, in particular to feudal kings. In a nutshell, it boils down to this rule: instead of remaining a mere *primus inter pares*, you must become a *solus primus*, and to do this you must undermine, weaken, and ultimately eliminate all competing authorities and hierarchies of social authority. Beginning at the highest levels of authority, with your most immediate competitors, and from there on down, ultimately, to the most elementary and decentralized level of social authority invested in the heads of individual family households, you (every statist) must use your own initial authority to undermine each and every rival authority and strip away its right to independently judge, discriminate, sentence, and punish within its own territorially limited realm of authority.

Kings other than you must no longer be allowed to freely determine who is another or the next king, who is to be included or excluded from the rank of kings, or who may come before them for justice and assistance. And likewise for all other levels of social authority, for noble lords and vassals as well as all separate local communities, orders, associations, and ultimately all individual family households. No one must be free to autonomously determine his own rules of admission and exclusion. That is, to determine who is supposed to be “in” or “out,” the conduct to

expect of those who are “in” and want to remain in good standing, and what member conduct instead results in various sanctions, ranging from disapproval, censure, and fines to expulsion and corporal punishment.

And how to accomplish this and centralize and consolidate all authority in the hands of a single territorial monopolist, first an absolute monarch and subsequently a democratic state? By enlisting the support of everyone resentful of not being included or promoted in some particular community, association, or social rank, or of being expelled from them and “unfairly” punished. Against this “unfair discrimination” you, the state or would-be state, promise to get the excluded “victims” in and help them get a “fair” and “nondiscriminating” treatment in return for their binding commitment to and affiliation with you. On every level of social authority, whenever and wherever the opportunity arises, you encourage and promote “deviant behavior” and “deviants” and enlist their support in order to expand and strengthen your own authority at the expense of all others.

Accordingly, the principal counterstrategy of *recivilization*, then, must be a return to “normality” by means of decentralization. The process of territorial expansion that went hand in hand with the centralization of all authority in one monopolistic hand must be reversed. Each and every secessionist tendency and movement, then, should be supported and promoted, because with every territorial separation from the central state another separate and rival center of authority and adjudication is created. And the same tendency should be promoted within the framework of any newly created separate and independent territory and center of authority. That is, any voluntary membership organization, association, order, club, or even household within the new territory should be free to independently determine its own house rules, i.e., its rules of inclusion, of sanctions, and of exclusion, so as to successively replace the current statist system of forced territorial and legal integration and uniformation with a natural, quasi-organic social order of voluntary territorial and legal-customary association and disassociation. Moreover, as an important addition, in order to safeguard this order of increasingly decentralized centers, ranks, and hierarchies of natural social authority from internal corruption or external (foreign) attack, each newly (re)emerging social authority should be encouraged to build as wide as possible

a network with similarly placed and like-minded authorities in other, “foreign” territories and jurisdictions for the purpose of mutual assistance in case of need.

With this I have reached a stage of conceptual analysis and of historical insight and background information that allows me, as my second task, to comment in some detail on the most recent attempt by Steven Pinker, with his book *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011), to give new impetus to the Whig theory of history, i.e., the myth that human history has been a somewhat rocky but nonetheless steady march upward and into the light, and that we today, in the Western world, live, if not in the best of all *possible* worlds, in a world better than anything that came before.

The book, unsurprisingly, has been enthusiastically greeted by the ruling elites and become a great commercial success, further boosted, undoubtedly, by Pinker’s status as a charismatic Harvard professor. In eight hundred pages of small print, Pinker assembles a huge mass of interesting pieces of information and interpretation concerning all sorts of things, but as far as the case he makes for some steady social progress culminating in the present, my verdict is entirely negative. Pinker may be an excellent psychologist, but he is out of his depth in the areas of philosophy, methodology, economics, and history, which all are required to pass sound judgment on the degree of social perfection of the various stages and long-run development of human history. In particular, his historical narratives frequently strike one as cherry-picked and either missing the wood for the trees or vice versa, but more often the trees for the wood.<sup>1</sup>

There is plenty to complain about in the book, not least the fact that Pinker is less than careful in unambiguously defining his terms so as to avoid all internal inconsistency or equivocation. Here, however, I shall concentrate my criticism on only two central points: first, Pinker’s “measurement” or criterion of social progress—his explanandum—and then his explanation for the thus “measured” phenomenon—his explanans.

Throughout his entire work, Pinker shows a remarkable hostility toward religion and hence it is hardly surprising that it does not cross his mind to use the biblical commandments

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<sup>1</sup> See on the following also Blankertz (2018), Cirillo and Taleb (2017), and Gray (2015).

(which, incidentally, he grossly misrepresents) as a benchmark for social perfection. Rather, his benchmark is “violence,” and social progress is defined as a reduction in violence. At first sight, this criterion does not seem too far away from the biblical-libertarian goal of peace. In fact, however, it turns out to be something quite different. His prime examples of violence are homicides and war casualties. The book is filled with tables and statistics on these indicators of violence. Incredibly, however, Pinker does not make a categorical distinction between aggressive and defensive violence. In the biblical commandments, with their explicit recognition of the sanctity of private property, such a distinction is made. It makes a difference if violence is used to take another man’s property or if a man uses violence in defense of his property against an aggressor. Murder is a categorically different thing from the killing of someone in self-defense. Not so for Pinker. Property and property rights do not systematically figure in his analyses. Indeed, the terms do not even appear in the book’s thirty-page subject index. For Pinker, violence is violence, and the reduction of violence is progress, regardless of whether this reduction is the result of the successful suppression of a people by and vis-à-vis another, conquering people, or the result of their own successful suppression of aggressors and conquerors. In Pinker’s world, a “stable” master-slave relationship is a sign of civilization, while a slave revolt accompanied by violence is a sign of decivilization. Likewise, a system of compulsory taxation—another term which like *property* is completely missing from the index (not coincidentally)—is an indicator of civilization regardless of the height of taxation, as long as it is simply stable, i.e., as long as the mere threat of punishment by the tax authority is sufficient to achieve general compliance on the part of the taxed. Any tax revolt and resistance is to count as decivilization. One is peace and progress to Pinker, whereas the other is violence and regression.

Pinker does not follow his own logic to the bitter end, but this must be done to reveal the full depravity of his thought. According to him, a smoothly run concentration camp, for instance, guarded by armed men who do not murder the inmates and in fact prevent them from killing each other, but who supply them with “happiness drugs” to keep them quietly working for the benefit of the guards until their natural (nonviolent) deaths, is the perfect model of peace and social progress, while the violent overthrow of the guards by the inmates is, well, violence and decivilization.

Based on this depraved view of social progress that knows no property and property rights violations, but only counts the number of unnatural deaths, bodily injuries, and broken bones, it should be expected that Pinker's evaluations of various historical episodes must yield some rather awkward or even grotesque conclusions, as in fact they do. In particular, it also explains how Pinker could misrepresent the present democratic age as the best of all times.

But is it, even on Pinker's own terms? Are we living in the least violent of times?

The answer is ambiguous. On the one hand there are wars, which throughout history have always been responsible for the largest number of casualties, far outweighing those resulting from "regular" small-scale interpersonal violence. In this regard, as Pasquale Cirillo and Nicholas Taleb ([2017]) have shown in response to Pinker's progression thesis, no statistically discernable trend can be established. According to Taleb, for the 600-year period from about 1500 to today, for which we have relatively reliable data, no significant change to the frequency of war or the number of war casualties (always set in relation to the total population) can be made out. Indeed, if anything, there has been a slight uptick in war-related violence with the spread of democracy (contrary to the proponents of the so-called democratic peace theory). And as for the seventy-year period since the end of World War II, which Pinker identifies as exceptionally peaceful and warless, Taleb points out that wars and especially large-scale wars are highly irregular and comparatively rare events and that an observation period of just seventy years, then, is far too short to serve as the basis for any far-reaching conclusions. But, as John Gray (2015) has argued contra Pinker, even this assessment of "modern times" is likely too rosy a picture, because it tends to systematically underestimate the number of war-related casualties among *noncombatants*, i.e., the number of civilians dying from various diseases spread through war or from long-term side effects of war such as "slow deaths" caused by economic deprivation and starvation. (The same danger of underestimation does not exist, at least not to the same extent, for the wars of the European Middle Ages, because they were typically small-scale, territorially restricted events and involved a comparatively sharp distinction between and separation of combatants and noncombatants.)

On the other hand, there exists indeed plenty of empirical evidence to speak of a suprasecular trend toward a reduction in violence—not to be confused with a reduction in infringements on property rights—as measured in particular by homicide rates (a homicide is a homicide regardless of who kills whom, why, or how). In this extra- or amoral sense, we can indeed speak of a “civilizing process,” as Pinker does and demonstrates in great detail. Pinker adopts this term from Norbert Elias and his book *The Civilizing Process* (1969), first published in German in 1939 and translated into English thirty years later. In this book, Elias describes and aims to explain the changes in everyday etiquette, from table manners to sexual mores, that occurred during the European Middle Ages and since. Put briefly, this process can be described as the gradual transition from brutish, gross, crude, boorish, bearish, immodest and intemperate, etc. pp., behavior to increasingly refined, controlled, considerate, modest and temperate, etc. pp., human conduct. Taking his cues from Elias, Pinker merely generalizes and expands Elias’s civilizing thesis from human etiquette to all of everyday life and behavior—and in this, in my judgment, he is by and large successful.

However, Pinker’s *explanation* for this extra- or amoral form of social progress from brutish to increasingly refined behavior is fundamentally mistaken. What he identifies as the principal cause of this development, and I will come to his cause in a moment, has actually, if anything, retarded and distorted this development. That is, absent Pinker’s cause, there would have been not less but more (and a significantly different) refinement in human conduct.

In fact, the grand, long-run historical tendency toward increasingly refined (or less brutish) behavior can be explained, simply enough, as the quasi-natural byproduct of the widening and deepening of the division of labor in the course of economic and technological development. The development of increasingly more and different productivity-enhancing tools and instruments proceeded hand in hand with the development and increasing differentiation of human crafts, skills, and talents. Put briefly, the importance of muscle power for economic success declined relative to the importance of brain power, physical finesse, and mental agility. Moreover, as I have tried to explain in my *A Short History of Man*, especially under Malthusian conditions, which prevailed for most of human history, a systematic premium for economic

success and indeed human survival is placed on the progressive development and growth of human intelligence, of low time preference, impulse control, and patience (which personal characteristics are at least partially hereditary and thus passed on through subsequent generations).

Pinker's explanation for this tendency toward a progressive refinement of human conduct is very different, however. His explanation for this development is the institution of states, i.e., territorial monopolists of ultimate decision-making. He claims that the most decisive and all-important step in the progressive refinement of human conduct has been the transition from a stateless social order to a statist society. And in this he is not entirely wrong—*given* that his definition of progressive refinement is an extra- or amoral one. Certainly, the institution of states, and more specifically of democratic states, is the principal cause of many central features and observations concerning our present-day conduct and routines—except to notice that many or most of them have little or nothing to do with moral progress and stand in open contradiction to biblical commandments. As well, violence as defined by Pinker may indeed have gone down—except to notice that the exercise of violence has been so “refined” and redefined under state auspices as to no longer fall under his narrow definition of the term. “Witches,” for instance, are no longer violently burnt, but shipped off instead, seemingly peacefully, into psychiatric wards to be drugged and pacified by medical professionals. Neighbors are no longer robbed of their property violently, but, in a much “refined” way and apparently without any physical violence, presented with regularly recurring tax bills to be quasi-automatically paid via bank transfer into the accounts of the state.

The central cause for social progress and increasing social perfection that Pinker identifies, then—the instituting of a state—actually turns out to be a central force of *decivilization*, retarding and distorting the underlying civilizing process naturally set in motion by the deepening and widening of the division of labor in the course of economic development. The institution of the state may explain the *refinement of violence* in the course of time, but it is itself a constant source of violence, however refined, and the driving force for its expansion and intensification. The subtitle of Pinker's book, *Why Violence Has Declined*, would lead most potential readers to expect an answer to a *moral* question or problem, because



of the typically negative of the term *violence*. Yet as such the book's title is an ingenious attempt at false and deceptive advertisement, because Pinker does nothing of the sort. Instead, he answers the very different question of how to "technically" or "scientifically" define violence so as to make the morally most depraved and violent institution of all appear as a peacemaker, or to make Satan look like an angel.

And how does he do this? First, by throwing out logic and plain common sense and then fudging the data and historical narratives to fit his plain nonsensical basic premise. Pinker presents this basic premise in the form of a simple diagram (2011, 35). In any two-person scenario, both parties may have a motive for violence, either as an aggressor, to prey on the other, or as a victim, to retaliate. Consequently, similarly to Hobbes, Pinker pictures this state of affairs as one of interminable violent conflict, as a *bellum omnium contra omnes*, a war of all against all. But miraculously, there is a cure to this problem, a third party, which Pinker calls a bystander, that acts as judge and assumes the role of a territorial monopolist of violence so as create lasting peace. But would this bystander not also be a potential predator? And would his predatory motives not be even strengthened if he were the monopolist of violence and did not have to fear any retaliation from his victims? Pinker does not address these rather obvious questions, let alone provide a systematic answer to them. Nor does he provide an answer to the question of why anyone would submit himself, without resistance, to any such bystanding monopolistic judge. Would no one recognize the potential danger for his own property from such an arrangement and put up resistance against its establishment? To be sure, Pinker cannot help noticing later on that empirically states qua territorial monopolists of violence did not emerge spontaneously or quasi-organically, but mafia-like, as some sort of protection racket. Yet this observation does not lead him to revise or reject his fundamental thesis about the principal role of the state as a peacemaker, nor does it lead him to the recognition that many if not most of the civilizing achievements that he ascribes to the workings of the state are in fact the results of popular *resistance* against state power, whether active and violent or passive and nonviolent. Indeed, as mentioned before, Pinker classifies any violent resistance against the state as decivilization, which implies that the prior violence exercised by the state vis-à-vis the resister must have been a civilizing and pacifying activity, not

to be counted as violence at all. It is almost needless to say that such mental acrobatics inevitably lead to various contradictions from which Pinker can extricate himself only through more or less ingenious but always intellectually painful contortions.

Pinker's identification of the state as the all-important force in the process of civilization coincides, of course, perfectly well with the assessment of all state rulers everywhere, and it is essentially the very same lesson that we all have been taught in school and university to accept as a quasi-axiomatic truth. In particular, it is the same lesson taught by all contemporary "leading economists." And yet it flatly contradicts one of the most elementary laws of economics: production under monopolistic conditions will lead to higher prices and lower quality of whatever is produced as compared to the production of the same product under competitive conditions, i.e., under conditions of "free entry." Most contemporary economists recognize this law, but they fail to apply it to the peculiar monopoly that is the state—most likely because most of them are employed by the state. But in fact it applies to the state as well, regardless of how one describes the specific product that it produces. If we describe the state, as Pinker does, as a territorial monopolist of peacemaking, then peace will be more expensive and of lower quality. If we describe it as a monopolist of justice, then justice will be of higher cost and of lower quality. If we describe it as a monopolist of violence, violence will be more expensive and of worse quality. Or if we describe it, as I think best, as a territorial monopolist of expropriation charged with the task of property protection, then we will predictably get much expropriation, which benefits the monopolist, and little protection, which will be only costly for the state. In any case, the result is always the same, and Pinker's central thesis concerning the civilizing effect of the institution of a state, then, must be rejected on logical grounds alone.

What about Pinker's empirical case, then? Logic cannot be refuted by empirical data, but if one throws out logic one is bound to misinterpret empirical data. Pinker offers a huge number of empirical data, tables, and graphs of great interest. I have quarrels with some of them, but here I accept them all for the sake of argument. My criticism concerns solely his interpretation of these data. In fact, and as mentioned before, I can largely go along with his generalized Elias-thesis about a civilizing process from brutish to refined human conduct. Based on logic, however, I would

interpret it differently. Whatever civilizing process there was, it did not occur because of the state, but in spite of or in resistance against the state; and whatever decivilizing process there was, it did not occur because of the absence of a state, but in spite of its absence, or as the late lingering effect of a prior (now dissolved) state and its earlier decivilizing tendencies. Post hoc does not imply propter hoc.

I will restrict my criticism to two central exhibits that Pinker offers in empirical support of his thesis, one concerning global affairs and another more regionally specific one that is most directly related to my earlier observations on European or Western history.

The empirical support for the global progression thesis is summarized in two tables (Pinker 2011, 49, 53). The first is supposed to show the decline of war deaths (as percentage of population) from human prehistory to the present. For this Pinker distinguishes four historical stages: prehistory, hunter-gatherer societies, hunter-horticulturalist societies, and finally state societies. He then provides data to show that there was at best only a minimal improvement from the highly violent prehistoric era to the hunter-gatherer stage; that violence increased again with the introduction of horticulture and agriculture (as there was then more economic inequality and more to loot); and that it finally dropped off sharply to a level never seen before in human history with the introduction of state societies. To further bolster his thesis, the second table compares the rate of death in warfare for “modern” nonstate societies (of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) with equally “modern” state societies, supposedly demonstrating once more the civilizing effect of states.

As said before, I shall not quibble about the numbers and estimates presented in these tables, except to note that any estimate concerning human prehistory and the far distant hunter-gatherer-horticulturalist stage(s) of human history must be viewed with a good dose of skepticism. Archeological findings of broken skulls, for instance, can provide a basis for some reasonable estimate of violence at particular places and times, and you may then also scale up such estimates to the approximated total world population at the time to calculate the violent death rate for any given period. But what you cannot do, and what is for rather obvious technical reasons and at least until today nearly impossible to do, is show that your sample of violence data is a representative *random*

sample, from which alone it would be legitimate to generalize specific findings to the population total.

The central reason, however, why Pinker's data fail to demonstrate what he wants to demonstrate is a different one. In his attempt to compare nonstate societies with state societies he is comparing what cannot be compared. His examples of nonstate societies, whether ancient or modern, refer almost exclusively to some obscure tribes outside of Europe (or in a few rare European cases to tribes living thousands of years prior to the Christian era); and all of them have either literally died out or else left no lasting trace in history in that it is nearly impossible today to trace any one contemporary society back to them genealogically as their historical predecessor. In distinct contrast, all the examples of state societies are taken from Europe and the Western world, where such genealogical back tracing is easily possible for periods of hundreds or even thousands of years. Obviously, such a comparison can yield an unbiased conclusion only under the assumption that the only relevant factor distinguishing European or "Western" people from Pinker's various tribesmen is the presence or absence of a state and that otherwise both peoples are the same, with the same physical and mental constitution and endowment.

Pinker never explicitly states this assumption, crucial for his own case. Probably because it would cast some immediate doubt on the validity of his conclusion. And, indeed, as a matter of fact there have been countless empirical studies in the meantime, in many disciplines, that demonstrate the utter falsehood of this assumption. Substantial differences exist in the physical and mental makeup and endowments of different people. Europeans, or more generally "Westerners," are decidedly *not* the same sort of people that Pinker's tribesmen are—and with that his first "empirical proof" of his progression thesis collapses. His proof is a nonstarter and proves nothing.

In addition, Pinker misses the trees of humans for the global wood of mankind in another regard, for according to his own data there are also some nonstate societies, even if only a few, that equal or even surpass the level of peacefulness achieved in state societies.

As a brief aside, Pinker might not even be aware of the fact that some sort of (false) human "equality" assumption is necessary to make his point, but he assumes it anyhow, again and again, if only implicitly or surreptitiously. Deep down, Pinker is an egalitarian,

as is particularly evident from his outspoken sympathy for the “progress” brought about by the so-called civil rights movement and the “noble” Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as well as Nelson Mandela, “one of history’s greatest statesmen” (notwithstanding both men’s well-known communist connections). Pinker is not an extreme (and extremely silly) egalitarian, of course. He makes distinctions between sexes, ages, races, and classes, and he is well aware of the unequal distribution of various human traits and talents within society—of intelligence, diligence, impulse control, sociability, etc. But as a politically correct “progressive,” he cannot bring himself to the recognition that the unequal distribution of these human traits and talents within society may be very different in different societies.

With Pinker’s first, global empirical “proof” rejected, what about his second, regional one? Here, all data come from Europe and insofar the danger of comparing incompatibles is avoided. Pinker devotes some ten pages (2011, 228–38) to this case, and the key information is condensed in a single graph (*ibid.*, 230) depicting the “Rate of Death in Conflicts in Greater Europe, 1400–2000.” If anything, however, this graph demonstrates the opposite of Pinker’s progress thesis. What it shows is that the longest period of (relative) peacefulness and low levels of violence was the almost two hundred years from 1400 until the very end of the sixteenth century. Yet this period falls precisely within the longer period of the European Middle Ages (and marks its end), and the Middle Ages, as I have argued before, are a prime example of a *stateless* social order. (Interestingly, Pinker concurs with this assessment of medieval Europe as *stateless*, but he then fails to see that it implies, according to his own data, an empirical refutation of his thesis.)

And it gets worse for Pinker’s case. According to the same graph, the following historical period, from the late sixteenth century to the present, is characterized by three huge spikes in the level of violence. The first spike, from the late sixteenth century until the Westphalian Peace in 1648, is largely associated with the Thirty Years’ War; the second, from the late eighteenth century until 1815 and somewhat less steep than the first, is associated with the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars; and the third and greatest spike, from 1914–45, is associated with the twentieth century’s two world wars. As well, for all intermediate periods the level of violence remained well above that of medieval times, a

level that was only reached again three centuries later, during the period from 1815–1914 and again during the post–World War II era. All in all, then, the record for postmedieval Europe in terms of violence appears rather depressive. And yet the entire period, from the late sixteenth century until today, is the era of states, which Pinker considers the driving forces of a “civilizing process.”

Pinker associates the first drastic spike in violence with religion and the “Wars of Religion.” In fact, however, they were wars to make states. Feudal kings and princes aspiring to the rank of absolute ruler made war to bring increasingly larger contiguous territories under their supreme control. In this, they took advantage of the recent split within Latin Christendom between Catholics and Protestants, and it was they who actually invented the term “Wars of Religion”—if only to deceive and hide their real purpose of state making, which had little if anything to do with religion. The second spike marks the turning point from monarchic to democratic states and was the result of Napoleonic France using war in the attempt to establish hegemony over all of continental Europe. And the third and most drastic spike in the level of violence marks the beginning of the era of full-fledged democracy and is the result of Britain and the USA going to war to establish world hegemony.

In his interpretation of these data, Pinker tries to make the best out of (for him) a rather desperate looking case. For one, he points out with the help of a second graph (2011, 229), that throughout the entire period the number of violent conflicts declined as the number of states fell due to territorial consolidation and centralization. A greater number of small-scale wars with few casualties was replaced with a smaller number of large-scale wars with many casualties. This does not appear much like progress, however, especially if it is kept in mind that the rate of death in conflicts actually increased over the entire statist era, even if the number of violent conflicts declined. To rescue his progress thesis, then, Pinker advances two auxiliary arguments. First, he claims that the more lethal character of (less frequent) modern wars has nothing to do with states *per se* or with their territorial expansion and consolidation, but is instead the quasi-accidental result of advances in military technology (a thesis that he elsewhere rejects when he states that the development of technology is essentially “neutral” to the level of violence). And secondly, to add more weight to his thesis about the decline in the frequency of war (but

*not*, to emphasize again, the decline of the war-related death rate!), he points out that the process of political centralization, i.e., the increasingly smaller number of states with increasingly larger territories was *not* accompanied by a corresponding increase in civil or intrastate war, and hence represents a *real civilizing gain* (and not just an accounting trick). Essentially, according to Pinker, with each political centralization, and ultimately the establishment of a world state, the likelihood of war declines and ultimately disappears, along with a parallel decline in and disappearance of civil war. In short: states civilize and a world state civilizes best. Or in reverse: each secession decivilizes and complete freedom of secession decivilizes most.

Economic logic (praxeology) dictates a very different interpretation of all this, however. States are not spontaneous voluntary associations. They are the result of war. And the existence of states increases the likelihood of further wars, because under statist conditions the cost of war making must no longer be borne privately, but can at least partially be externalized onto innocent third parties. That the number of wars then declines as the number of states falls and that there can be no interstate war once the number of States has been reduced to a single world state is not much more than a definitional truth. Even if less frequent, however, the further advanced the process of political centralization and territorial consolidation, i.e., the closer to the ultimate statist goal of a world state, the more lethal such wars will become.

Nor can the institution of a world state deliver what Pinker promises. True, there can then be no interstate wars, by definition. For the sake of argument, we may even concede that the frequency and the casualty rate of internal, civil wars may decline as well (although the empirical evidence for this appears increasingly doubtful). In any case, however, what can be safely predicted about the consequences of a world state is this: with the removal of all interstate competition, i.e., with the replacement of a multitude of different territorial jurisdictions with different laws, customs, and tax and regulation structures by a single worldwide uniform jurisdiction, any possibility of voting with one's feet against a state and its laws is removed as well. Hence, a fundamentally important constraint on the growth and expansion of state power is gone, and the cost of the production of justice (or whatever it is that the state claims to produce) will accordingly rise to unprecedented



heights, while its quality will reach a new low. There may or may not be less of the broken bones–type violence à la Pinker, but in any case there will be more “refined” violence, i.e., property rights violations that do not count as violence to Pinker, than ever before; and the world-state society, then, will look more like the stable concentration camp scenario mentioned earlier than anything resembling a free, convivial social order.

Stripped down to its bare bones Pinker’s central argument amounts to a string of logical absurdities: according to him, tribal societies somehow “merge” to form small states and small states successively “coalesce” into increasingly larger states. If this “merging” and “coalescing” were, as the terms insinuate, a spontaneous and voluntary matter, however, the result, by definition, would not be a state but an anarchic social order composed of and governed by free membership associations. If, on the other hand, this “merging” and “coalescing” results instead in a state, it cannot be a spontaneous and voluntary matter but must, of logical necessity, involve violence and war (in that any territorial monopolization necessitates the violently enforced prohibition of “free entry”). But how, then, can anyone such as Pinker, who wants to reduce violence and war to a minimum and possibly eliminate it entirely, prefer a social system, any system, that *necessitates* the exercise of violence and war to a system that does *not* do so? Answer: only in throwing out all of logic and claiming that the relationship between the state and violence and war is *not* a logically necessary one, but a merely contingent, empirical relationship instead—that just as it is indeed an entirely *empirical* matter whether or not *you or I* commit violence and go to war, so it is also a purely contingent, empirical matter whether or not a *state* commits violence and goes to war.

Thus, according to Pinker, World War II with all its atrocities, for instance, had essentially nothing to do with the institution of states but was a historical fluke, owing to the evildoings of a single, deranged individual, Adolf Hitler. Indeed, unbelievably and seemingly without blushing (although that is admittedly difficult to tell from a written text) Pinker approvingly quotes historian John Keegan saying that “only one European really wanted war—Adolf Hitler.” (2011, 208) Question: But how much evil can a single, deranged individual do without the institution of a centralized state? How much evil could Hitler have done within

the framework of a stateless society such as those of the Middle Ages? Would he have become a great lord, a king, a bishop, or a Pope? Indeed, how much evil could he have done even within the framework of a thousand ministates, such as Liechtenstein, Monaco, or Singapore? Answer: not much, and certainly nothing comparable to the evils associated with World War II. “No Hitler, no Churchill, no Roosevelt, or no Stalin, then no war,” as Pinker would have it, holds *not*, then, but rather: “no highly centralized state, then no Hitler, Churchill, Roosevelt, or Stalin.” Remove the state, and they may have become a Jack the Ripper, a Charles Ponzi, or even harmless people, but not the mass-murdering monsters that we know them to have been. Institute the state, and you create, attract, and breed monsters.

In sum, then, Pinker’s attempt to rescue the Whig theory of history and demonstrate that we live in the best of all worlds turns out an utter failure. Indeed, one may even say that his book and its great commercial success is itself empirical proof of the contrary.

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