

Book report

Joy Stoddard, January 10, 2021

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

by Steven Pinker

Part One of **Enlightenment Now** focuses on the Enlightenment

In **Enlightenment Now**, first published in 2018, Pinker examines are we unhappy and is the world doomed, or are we making progress? Using data spanning decades up to about 2015, Pinker presents that humanity is better off than at any other time in history. What a timely, interesting read during the holidays as the world enters 2021.

Chapter One, *Dare to Understand*, details The Enlightenment themes of reason, science, humanism and progress, *“a conviction that knowledge can enhance human flourishing.”*

Chapter Two, *Entro, Evo, Intro*, presents critical ideas about the human condition and the nature of progress that we know, and Enlightenment thinkers of the 17th and 18th centuries didn't know: entropy, evolution and information. *“These concepts define the narrative of human progress: the tragedy we were born into, and our means for eking out a better existence.”*

In Chapter Three, *Counter-Enlightenments*, Pinker states that Enlightenment humanism is far from a “crowd-pleaser” and that perhaps most feel “saving the lives of billions, eradicating diseases, feeding the hungry are bo-ring.” It's as if he presents that people think that longevity, compassion and freedom are not enough for people to feel as if the world is not falling apart, so in order to make the case, Pinker takes an appraisal of human progress by numbers.

Part Two of **Enlightenment Now** focuses on Progress

In Chapter Four, *Progressophobia*, Pinker asks *“How can we soundly appraise the state of the world?”* By counting, he says. A quantitative mindset aims to identify problems and solutions for all, not just the people we know. He runs through objections to prepare the way for his presentation of other measures of progress, declaring that the world has made spectacular progress in life, health, safety, literacy, and sustenance. And *“almost no one knows about it”*.

Chapter Five, *Life*, shows data on World life expectancy increasing during 1760 to 2002, from 30s to 70s, while child mortality and maternal mortality plummeted.

Chapter Six, *Health*, lauds scientists and their discoveries that created progress like a reduction in childhood deaths from infectious disease.

Chapter Seven, *Sustenance*, details that the world has progressed from famine to the developing world feeding itself with an increase in calorie consumption. Declines occurred in

children's stunting, undernourishment, and famine deaths, while the world added about 5 billion people in the last 70 years.

Chapter Eight, *Wealth*, shows reductions in extreme poverty from 1820-2015, due in part, Pinker lists, to The Great Convergence of these China's rise/the death of Mao/the decline of communism, humanistic leaders of democracy like Nelson Mandela, the end of the cold war, globalization and science and technology, including communication and as a generator of wealth.

In Chapter Nine, *Inequality*, Pinker shows data on global inequality declining, and he examines the rise and fall in inequality in the 19th century, a plunge that overlaps the two world wars. "Wars are just one kind of catastrophe, however, according to historian Walter Scheidel who identifies *"four horsemen of leveling: mass-mobilization warfare, transformative revolution, state collapse, and lethal pandemics"*." Critics of capitalism could examine *"how little the pre-capitalist societies of the past spent on poor relief."*

Social spending increases in the US from the 1960s onward and poverty rates in the US decline. In fact, the elephant shape in the "growth incidence curve" of percentile of global income distribution reveals that the winners of globalization include most of humanity. GDP per capita has increased while the number of people living in extreme poverty has decreased. Reviewer's note: 2020 is estimated to have experienced massive increases in global poverty.

In Chapter Ten, *The Environment*, Pinker states that people can satisfy their needs with ideas to increase their resources. A chart on Pollution, Energy and Growth in the US details that 1970 emissions decreased, while population, vehicle miles and GDP increased through 2015. Temperate forest deforestation declined, oil spills are down while oil shipping is up and finally, dematerialization is due to progress through technology.

Chapter Eleven, *Peace*, details a decline in great power wars, battle deaths, and genocide deaths. *"Inventions such as trade, democracy, economic development, peacekeeping forces, and international laws and norms are tools that help build the world."*

Chapter Twelve, *Safety*, presents declines in World homicide deaths, plane crashes, natural disaster deaths and lightning strike deaths, and declines in US motor vehicle accidents, pedestrian deaths, deaths from falls, fire, and drowning (with increases in deaths from poisons – liquids and solids.)

Chapter Thirteen, *Terrorism*, shows World deaths from terrorism at 38,422, deaths from war at 97,496, deaths from homicide at 437,000, deaths from motor vehicle accidents at 1,250,000, deaths from all accidents at 5,000,000 and all deaths at 56,400,000.

Chapter Fourteen, *Democracy*, illumines the stripping of power from governments to kill.

Chapter Fifteen, *Equal Rights*, shows charts of the decrease of World decriminalization of homosexuality, victimization of children in the US, and World child labor.

Chapter Sixteen, *Knowledge*, spotlights an increase in literacy, education, years of schooling, female literacy and IQ gains.

Chapter Seventeen, *Quality of Life*, presents a decline in US work hours and housework (due to appliances and running water), an increase in leisure time for both men and women, a reduction in the cost of US air travel and an increase in international tourism.

In Chapter Eighteen, *Happiness*, Pinker asks “*But are we any happier?*” He relays that if people don’t take in improvements, they find new concerns to fret. So, he examines the facts about human happiness. An interesting point he shares is “*happy people live in the present; those with meaningful lives have a narrative about their past and a plan for the future*”. A few notable charts of US data are included here: increases in life satisfaction and income, the decline of loneliness and suicide (pre-COVID-19), and an increase in happiness and excitement.

In Chapter Nineteen, *Existential Threats*, Pinker refers to people’s fears of cyber war, nuclear war, or a bioterror or bioterrorism that will lead to one million casualties in a single event. Yikes! Thankfully we are now in 2021 with COVID-19 vaccines. One chart shows the reduction of nuclear weapons in Russia and the United States, and although it is clear they won’t be abolished anytime soon, the gradual stepdown could take them into the level of other threats we face like asteroids or Artificial Intelligence. One might examine North Korea’s plans, though.

In Chapter Twenty, *The Future of Progress*, Pinker reminds us that the world is giving peace a chance and there is a case for continuing progress, like how improvements build on one another such as innovations in digital manufacturing and cancer therapies along with global education that could be transformed. He says just because America and Europe are experiencing malaise, the rest of the world can continue to make progress, simultaneously because of and despite Donald Trump. Since the invention of science, the world has made progress despite setbacks. *To quote Hans Rosling: “I’m not an optimist. I’m a very serious possibilist.”*

Part III of **Enlightenment Now** focuses on Reason, Science and Humanism

Chapter Twenty-One, *Reason*, asks “*What can be done to improve standards of reasoning? Persuasion by facts and logic, the most direct strategy, is not always futile*”.

Chapter Twenty-Two, *Science*, explores how collective decisions can be made more wisely.

Chapter Twenty-Three, *Humanism*, explores a growing movement which promotes a non-supernatural basis for meaning and ethics: good without God. Pinker explores two systems of belief that humanism stands in stark contrast to, theistic morality and the ideology behind resurgent authoritarianism, nationalism, populism, reactionary thinking, even fascism. (“If

Nietzsche's ideas are repellent and incoherent, why do they have so many fans?") He ends with a summary of human kind being blessed by resources, for any sentient creature with the power of reason and the urge to persist in its being.