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Accentuate the Positive

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Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong About the World—and Why Things Are Better Than You Think
by Hans Rosling with Ola Rosling and Anna Rosling Rönnlund
Flatiron, 342 pp., $27.99

Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress
by Steven Pinker
Viking, 556 pp., $35.00

Is the world getting better or worse? Both, it seems. In January 2018, *Time* ran a cover story called "The Optimists," in which the issue's guest editor, Bill Gates, reported that things are on the whole improving. Within the month, *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* moved the hands of its Doomsday Clock thirty seconds closer to midnight, signifying that the end is as nigh as it has ever been.

Arindam Dey/AFP/Getty Images

An Indian health official administering polio vaccine drops to newborn babies at a hospital in Agartala, India, as part of a nationwide program to eradicate polio, January 2018

The Doomsday Clock was created in the late 1940s to warn of nuclear Armageddon and now monitors other risks as well. Climate change has been factored in since 2007, bioterrorism and artificial intelligence were included in 2015, and further causes for concern will no doubt be added in due course. The clock's hands have been moved twenty-three times since 1947, mostly in an ominous direction, but it is only a gimmick. There is no pretense that it measures anything except the degree of foreboding felt by a panel of scientists and academics.

Time's optimists, by contrast, claim to base their sunnier outlook on precise quantification. It is "backed by data," wrote Gates. He mentioned, among other things, a halving since 1990 of the number of children who die before their fifth birthday; a decline in the proportion of the world's population that lives in extreme poverty, from over one third in 1990 to about one tenth now; and a rise during the past century in the number of countries in which it is legal to be gay, from twenty to more than a hundred.

There may also have been a rise in the number of books that count the ways in which things are going well. At least fifteen have appeared in English since the publication in 2000 of *It's Getting Better All the Time: 100 Greatest Trends of the Last 100 Years* by Julian Simon, an economist who died in 1998, and Stephen Moore. Nobody has yet unveiled a Paradise Clock to mark the world's measurable progress toward utopia, but many of these authors do seem to hear such a thing ticking.

Others are less sanguine, since there is no evident method of weighing good news of one sort against bad news of another. Simon's book had a dissenting preface by his widow, Rita Simon, who was uncomfortable with the positive terms in which her husband had described the twentieth century. Despite his 146 tabulations of encouraging developments, ranging from a rise in life expectancy to increased numbers of teeth in adult mouths and of orchestras in US cities, she pointed out that the past century also saw the rise of Nazism, Stalinism, and Maoism, and the deaths of at least 170 million people at the hands of their own governments.

Optimism can seem heartless and naive even when there is plenty of good news to report, as Hans Rosling notes in his instructive *Factfulness*: "Because you know that huge problems remain…you *feel* that me saying that the world is getting better is like me telling you that everything is fine." For this reason, Rosling, a Swedish doctor and professor of public health who died in 2017, preferred to call himself a "possibilist," which means

> someone who neither hopes without reason, nor fears without reason…. As a possibilist, I see all this progress, and it fills me with conviction and hope that further progress is possible. This is not optimistic…. It is having a worldview that is constructive and useful.

Steven Pinker, in *Enlightenment Now*, is similarly uneasy with the label of "optimist." Bill Gates is content with it, but in effect redefines it: "Being an optimist…means you're inspired to look for people making progress…and to help spread that progress more widely."

This pragmatic stance was anticipated and dubbed "the new optimism" in an article in *Popular Science Monthly* in 1913 by George Patrick, an American philosopher and psychologist. According to Patrick, the old optimism said, "Cheer up, for the world is good

and beautiful," whereas the new says more modestly, "Cheer up, for you can make the world good and beautiful." His coinage never caught on, perhaps because nobody was interested in any kind of optimism after World War I promptly broke out.

Today's new optimists often have a hard job convincing people that there has been much progress. The problem is not just that there is room for debate about what counts as progress, or that some people fear impending disasters, but that almost everyone is mistaken about basic measurements of the state of the world. It was a singular achievement of Rosling to illustrate this surprising fact and to show that it cannot be explained by mere ignorance.

For several decades, he gave simple questionnaires to various audiences around the world, and in 2017 a version of his quiz was administered by two polling firms to 12,000 people in fourteen countries. Here are a few of its multiple-choice questions:

> How did the number of deaths per year from natural disasters change over the last hundred years?
>
> (A) more than doubled; (B) remained about the same; (C) decreased to less than half.
>
> How many of the world's one-year-old children today have been vaccinated against some disease?
>
> (A) 20 percent; (B) 50 percent; (C) 80 percent.
>
> In the last 20 years, the proportion of the world population living in extreme poverty has…
>
> (A) almost doubled; (B) remained more or less the same; (C) almost halved.

Given twelve such questions—other topics included average life expectancy, female education, endangered species, and access to electricity—one person out of 12,000 got eleven right, nobody got them all right, 15 percent got them all wrong, and the average number of correct answers was 2.2. Most people did worse than they would have done if they had picked their responses at random, which would have produced an average of four correct answers. As Rosling puts it, chimps would have done better than humans did.

Rosling's quiz is shaped so that the correct answer to each question is also the one that corresponds to the way any well-meaning person would want the world to be. (Thus in all three examples above, the correct answer is C.) It therefore seems that people are biased against good news on such topics. Expert knowledge does not appear to be much help in overcoming this bent. Rosling reports that an audience of health scientists did even worse

than laypeople on his vaccination question. His results generally match those of similar studies, including a survey spanning thirty-eight countries by the Ipsos MORI market research firm in 2017.

Rosling blames our misperceptions on an "overdramatic" worldview, and he identifies ten habits of thought that contribute to it. One is a "negativity instinct" that leads us to notice unpleasant things more than pleasant ones, and which results from three main factors, according to Rosling. Bad news is loudly reported and memorable, whereas incremental improvements tend to be neither. We misremember the past as better than it was. And we feel that it is unseemly to dwell on the good when so much is bad. Most of his book consists of helpful tricks for overcoming the mental habits that can lead us astray, and tips for interpreting and digesting data.

While Rosling wanted calmly to curb our "cravings for drama," Pinker prefers to make an angry song and dance. In *Enlightenment Now*, he ridicules "morose cultural pessimists" who are loath to acknowledge progress and vilifies many supposed enemies of the sciences and humanism that he thinks made it possible. So incensed is he by the "declinism" and "progressophobia" of our times that he is apt to let his keyboard run away with him. "Intellectuals," he writes, without qualification, "hate progress." And "people"—we do not learn exactly who, but literary "elites" and "the chattering class" are his stock villains—are said to regard saving billions of lives and feeding the hungry as "*Bo*-ring."

Enlightenment Now is the most ambitious work of its genre so far, and it is not boring. Awash with graphs, it documents improvements in human life, mostly from around the nineteenth century onward. Dickens's Thomas Gradgrind pronounced himself "ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to." So is Pinker. His Gradgrindian juggernaut plows through health, wealth, food, happiness, the environment, peace, and human rights, among other things, and the upshot is that lots of things have on average been getting better in most places for a while.

Even some acts of God are becoming less irksome. Pinker reports a thirty-seven-fold decline since the beginning of the twentieth century in the chances of a person in the United States being killed by lightning. This happy fact results from acts of mankind, namely better medical treatment, weather prediction, and safety training, plus shifts of population from rural to urban areas. Some other positive changes are less easy to explain, but nevertheless real, such as the so-called Flynn effect, a significant rise in IQ scores over the course of the twentieth century. Increases in these scores have been measured in the Americas since the 1920s, in Europe since the 1930s, and have been confirmed for thirty-one countries (though the scores have recently been falling in some places).

Despite its wider range, *Enlightenment Now* is in one respect more solid than Pinker's earlier *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (2011). The new

book focuses on relatively recent times for which sources of data are easier to interpret, whereas *Better Angels* spanned nearly all of human history. Its forays into archaeology and the Middle Ages did not fare well under expert scrutiny. Pinker's analyses of data in *Enlightenment Now* will not be the last word on the more contentious subjects in his broad remit, but they are on balance salutary.

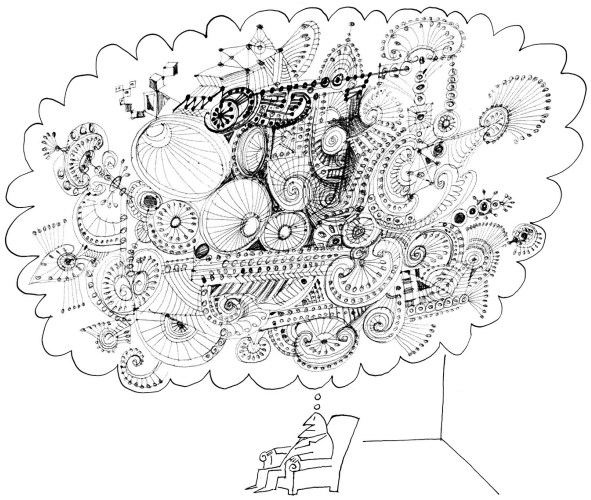
His commitment to the cause of spreading good news, though, does blinker him now and then. For example, a chapter on economic inequality smacks of rhetorical sleight of hand. Its aim is to refute the idea that rising inequality within some countries is a "sign that modernity has failed to improve the human condition." Pinker's reply is that one should not confuse inequality with poverty or with unfairness.

That is a reasonable point. But it is the seemingly unfair way in which the wealth of the new super-rich has been accumulated, and the unhealthy amount of political power that it affords them, to which people mainly object when they complain that growing inequality amounts to the opposite of progress. Whether or not these problems are properly designated as inequalities is a side issue: what matters is that they are regrettable developments.

For Pinker, the reason why human life changed for the better in the past two centuries is simple: "The Enlightenment has *worked*—perhaps the greatest story seldom told." He construes the Enlightenment broadly, to include not just its core in the last third of the eighteenth century but a quarter of a millennium of European history, from the intellectual pioneers of the early 1600s to liberals in the first half of the nineteenth century. What these thinkers had in common, according to Pinker, was a belief that we can and should "apply reason and sympathy to enhance human flourishing."

As a slogan for the long Enlightenment, this is apt enough, though we get few further particulars. Pinker is thumping a bible that he rarely opens. And when he does open it, he mainly sees a mirror. Pinker, who is a psychologist and an atheist, writes that Montesquieu, Adam Smith, Kant, Diderot, and other eighteenth-century thinkers were "cognitive neuroscientists" and "evolutionary psychologists" avant la lettre, because they all wanted some sort of science of man. He concedes that "not all of the Enlightenment thinkers were atheists." It would be more accurate to say that almost none of them were.

Pinker does not explain exactly how "the gifts of the Enlightenment" were delivered but is sure that it is the Enlightenment that deserves credit for our better lives. How much did thinkers have to do with it all, though? Adam Smith praised market economies; he did not invent them. Pinker notes that the Industrial Revolution "ushered in more than two centuries of economic growth," so one might think that it, too, was deserving of thanks. Perhaps we are to suppose that the Enlightenment was responsible for the Industrial Revolution.



The finer points of history are, however, not Pinker's concern. His aim is to promote the values that were characteristic of the Enlightenment, namely "reason, science, humanism, and progress." Science is described as "the refining of reason to understand the world." There is a brief but stimulating account of psychological investigations of reasoning. Humanism is defined as the "goal of maximizing human flourishing." The nebulousness of some of what he is promoting becomes apparent in the last third of the book. Much of it is a sort of hunting ground for the pursuit of assorted bugbears, in which Pinker takes issue with various enemies and supposed enemies of the Enlightenment.

The foes include religious faith, authoritarian populism, nationalism, theistic morality, tribalism, mysticism, and the Romantic movement, which was allegedly too dreamy to accept that "peace and prosperity were desirable ends." Today's intellectuals are also a threat even when they are not nationalists, religious, or unduly Romantic. They tend to be not only pessimistic progressophobes but also openly hostile to other Enlightenment values. Pinker's attacks on intellectuals are a volte-face. Instead of the sunny, sober, and numerate evaluation of evidence in his documentation of progress, we get flimsily supported jeremiads and hyperbolical moaning.

He writes that reason, science, and humanism are treated by today's thinkers with "indifference, skepticism, and sometimes contempt." Science fares the worst in this trinity of derided ideals. It is taught as "just another narrative or myth" in "many" educational establishments, and liberal arts curricula are "often designed to poison" students against it. Also, "many" historians of science think it "naïve to treat science as the pursuit of true explanations." Unable to produce hard evidence of this antiscientific blight, Pinker tuts over reading lists. He reports an analysis of a million syllabi that shows Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* to be the second-most-assigned book about science. This book has indeed been taken by some, though not by its late author, to encourage the idea that science is irrational. Yet *The Communist Manifesto* is the second-most-assigned book about politics, and colleges do not seem to be awash with Communists.

Pinker quotes the abstract of a journal article, "Glaciers, Gender, and Science," as an example of work that treats science as "just a pretext for oppression." He does not seem to have read the article itself, which is no such thing. What it argues is that glaciology can improve the quality of its data by taking more care to include evidence collected by

indigenous observers and female scientists. Thus it aims to enhance science, not to undermine it. Feminist postcolonial glaciology is not everyone's cup of tea, so Pinker can expect some easy laughs with this sally. He helpfully directs readers to a Twitter feed where they can titter over more of the same. One wonders which Enlightenment values he takes himself to be exemplifying with such tactics.

There is also a "war on science" waged by intellectuals who are "enraged" by its intrusion into the humanities. The failing humanities, which have "yet to recover from the disaster of postmodernism," are thus rebuffing an integration of disciplines that could be "one of the greatest potential contributions of modern science." Pinker's contention that there is a damaging struggle between C.P. Snow's "Two Cultures" is belied by his own statement that "humanities scholars themselves tend to be receptive to insights from science." He seems merely to have been piqued by some magazine articles and unwilling to let go of an unedifying spat he had with the former literary editor of *The New Republic* in 2013, in which one side gave unconvincing arguments to show that science will never illuminate the humanities and the other gave unconvincing examples of how it already has.

According to Pinker, the demonization of science is jeopardizing its progress, for two main reasons. First, bureaucrats who worry about ethics are tying it up in red tape. He quotes some speculative musings that X-rays and other medical boons would never have made it past the regulators today. The social sciences are affected, too. We learn that "anthropologists are forbidden to speak with illiterate peasants who cannot sign a consent form," though his evidence is one researcher who says it once took him several months to get such approval. Another effect of the vilification of science is that students who might have made discoveries and contributed to humanity decide instead to go into finance, because they have been taught that science is "a rationalization of racism, sexism, and genocide." Pinker cites no investigations of this supposed phenomenon but assures us he has "seen" it happen, thus failing to heed his own homily to declinists: "Remember your math: an anecdote is not a trend."

Lurking behind recent intellectual movements that are "hostile to science" is their "godfather," Friedrich Nietzsche, who also represents the "opposite of humanism" and thus seems to be the arch-enemy of Enlightenment values in Pinker's eyes. Nietzsche died in 1900, yet his ideas have "obvious" connections to the causes of both world wars and "links" to Bolshevism and Stalinism.

There is a story that one of Nietzsche's schoolmates fashioned a puppet of the future philosopher and made it say absurd things. Pinker does the same. According to him, "Nietzsche argued that it's *good* to be a callous, egoistic, megalomaniacal sociopath." He supports this claim with five short quotes, mostly extracted from Nietzsche's notebooks. Since Nietzsche's remarks can be deliberately provocative, playful, and prone to dramatic

overstatement, it is something of a fool's errand to deduce his views from sound bites. This is true even if you are a careful reader of Nietzsche, and Pinker is not one of those. In one place, he quotes part of a sentence about "facts" and "interpretations" and gives it a subjectivist twist that Nietzsche explicitly rejected later on in the same paragraph.

Nietzsche's writings have indeed been appropriated by fascists, white nationalists, and anti-Semites, as Pinker reminds us, but they have also been embraced by classical liberals, socialists, feminists, and Zionists, which does not fit Pinker's puppet so well. In one of his books, Nietzsche declared that he sided with "the spirit of the Enlightenment," and in another he attacked German thinkers for renouncing this spirit. In later life, he sometimes blamed eighteenth-century philosophes for the French Revolution and other ills, but he remained an ardent admirer of Voltaire.

It is not always easy or useful to divide writers into pro- and anti-Enlightenment camps, as Pinker is keen to do. I have seen Rousseau advertised in one bookshop as a "key Enlightenment thinker" and in another as a "key Counter-Enlightenment" one. Both are right and not just because Rousseau was a complicated man. How should one label writers who share all or some of the Enlightenment's ideals but think there is plenty of room for improvement in the way they are implemented?

A case in point is *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, an influential book that was begun during World War II by two Germans in American exile, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, who saw the rising barbarism of a supposedly enlightened Europe and wondered what had gone wrong. They called for "enlightenment to reflect on itself if humanity is not to be totally betrayed" and produced a critique aimed at formulating "a positive concept of enlightenment which liberates it from its entanglement in blind domination." One can dispute their analysis, but not their commitment to human welfare. Pinker does not sufficiently distinguish Enlightenment values from attempts to realize them in particular times and places, so for him such critiques are just anti-Enlightenment screeds.

Pinker is far from alone in believing that critics of modernity have sapped the West's faith in progress. Robert Nisbet, an American sociologist who died in 1996, reported in his *History of the Idea of Progress* (1980) that intellectuals have more or less abandoned this faith. (Nisbet also claimed to detect that middle-class youth were withdrawing from science and that there had been an "ominous…retreat from reason.")

Pinker quotes Nisbet's book approvingly but does not notice the implications of the fact that it was written almost forty years ago. Its publication was followed by over three decades of the most dramatic material progress in human history, during which hundreds of millions of people in India, China, and elsewhere were delivered from poverty. Rosling's charts show that child mortality, child labor, slavery, and many other evils continued their declines after 1980, while literacy, immunization, female education, the

availability of clean water, and many other good things continued to rise. This suggests that the sort of intellectual skepticism about progress that Nisbet reported and Pinker still bewails does not seriously impede progress itself. So why make such a fuss about it?

Who does the most to make people richer, healthier, happier, and less likely to be killed by lightning? Is it those who accentuate the positive or those who accentuate the negative? Rosling notes that progress in human rights, women's education, catastrophe relief, and many other matters is often largely thanks to activists who believe things are getting worse, though he speculates that they might achieve even more if they were readier to recognize improvements. Bill Gates, in his call to optimism, acknowledges that to improve the world, "you need something to be mad about." Focusing on bad cases is indeed no mere cognitive malfunction. Voltaire would hardly have waged his campaign against clerical abuses of power if he had been struck by the fact that, statistically speaking, most priests were perfectly decent chaps.

When he coined "the new optimism," George Patrick argued that dissatisfaction with the state of the world was not a defect. It was instead "the voice of progress proclaiming its discontent with the present and demanding improvement." Perhaps new optimists should not forget to thank old pessimists for the fruits of their discontent.
