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Things are getting better every day. The standard of living is going up. An increasing number of individuals are drawn to big cities and adopt a more urban lifestyle. Poverty is receding and the backward agrarian masses, in turn, are propelled into modernity. They are also, without a doubt, becoming more educated—not just literate: they enjoy access to a rapidly expanding array of cultural goods and experiences that expose them to world culture, often for free. In the process, they leave behind the moral strictures of traditionalism and embrace a robust secular outlook. As a result, gender equality has made huge leaps forward. Scientific culture has become part of the standard educational curricula, weeding out the last remnants of religious obscurantism. Darwin’s theory of evolution is taught in kindergarten. The crippling division between the natural sciences and the social sciences is a thing of the past, and economic science is now firmly established on laws that are also those commanding the development of human societies and of nature throughout history. Science and technology have reached such a level of development that nature itself can be re-engineered—major rivers can be deflected, seas nebulized, for the welfare of all. Science and technology also project their light into the deepest recesses of human nature: while past centuries gave credence to metaphysical speculations about the inner workings of the mind, there is now a true and materialistic science of it. Cognitive neuroscience can identify genius by pointing at the morphology of the brain or detect deviant behaviors *in nuce*, thus preventing unfortunate events and increasing social welfare. And the code behind genetics has been made transparent to human comprehension and intervention, allowing for all kinds of beneficial manipulations, including the breeding of high-yield agricultural varieties. Of course, the way of progress is paved with hardships and obstacles. Some of them are unforeseeable and generated by progress itself. Others are deliberate and the work of deniers representing irrational attachments to superseded beliefs or, worse, “reactionary thinking, even fascism” (443). The former will be overcome by the all-powerful process of scientific advancement, the latter, by a re-educational regimen of “critical thinking and debiasing programs,” will show the skeptics how wrong they were and help them see the light (378). No, dear reader, you are not dreaming: all this is true and you live in the Soviet Union.

Or maybe you have just closed Steven Pinker’s latest book, which would not have been out of place as propaganda material in the age of Brezhnevian stagnation. *Enlightenment Now* has all the trappings of an

official doctrine, along with the tonnage and elegance of a Soviet tractor. It mixes the cheerful idiocy of a Komsomol prep talk (“Everything is amazing,” 283) with the somber undertones of intellectual policing (“enemies” of the Enlightenment have entered “factions of mainstream culture,” 349). It also pummels you with data the way a Party goon would bludgeon you out of your denial of socialist progress until you accept that the official figures of the *Gosplan* reflect reality. For everything *is* going better—literally, everything. It is just that there is something wrong with people who cannot get themselves to accept the obvious. Take the environment, for instance. You would think it is in bad shape and going awry, but you are mistaken: “nature has begun to rebound.” If you do not see it for yourself there must be something wrong with you because “the improvements can be seen with the naked eye” (129, 130). Are you still doubting what your own senses tell you? Here are a dozen suggestive charts, if you are the nerdy type. Still unconvinced? Then you have a problem with objectivity and rationality. But do not worry: cognitive psychologists and behavioral economists have already figured out all these mental biases, and soon, you will be gently “nudged” toward the right view.¹ Or perhaps you have been swayed by one of these intellectual curmudgeons who make a living from casting their aspersions on the legacies of the Age of Reason. For the enemies of the Enlightenment are lurking everywhere: “apocalyptic” environmentalism (a.k.a. “greenism”), religion in general (and Islam in particular), the literary intelligentsia (whose contempt for the lay person at times “border[s] on the genocidal,” 247), Michel Foucault, postmodern nihilism, Frantz Fanon, political correctness, Pope Francis, identity politics, the academic Left, 1960s counterculture, the mainstream media, C.P. Snow’s Second Culture, “leftist intellectuals” who deny the existence of IQ and “progressive” intellectuals who “*really* hate progress...” (39). Do not listen to them: it is all fake news. The truth is known. So is the formula for social progress—and where it does not quite work, it is just a matter of applying more of it. All it needs is mass inculcation, and an intellectual champion.

There is something deeply, rigidly dogmatic about *Enlightenment Now*. Steven Pinker not only wants to convince you of the ubiquity of progress: he wants you to *believe* in it. Despite all the data charts, and for all the critique of religion in the last chapter, he ultimately comes close to professing a faith in a kind of ineffable providentialism: it is not just information technology that is working its ethereal magic—“*something in the nature of technology*, particularly information technology, works to decouple human flourishing from the exploration of physical stuff”—but more generally the unidirectional flow of all the trends Pinker claims to map “makes it seem as if there really is a mysterious arc bending toward justice” (136, 213). The book requires the same leap of faith from its readers.

And faith—lots of it—is indeed what is needed to accept Pinker’s proposition that humanity is on its way to solving all the problems that have beset it since the origins of time, thanks to the global diffusion of a set of ideas that, according to him, define the Enlightenment. Pinker wants to show how these ideas “have worked” by vindicating them “with data” (5-6). As is often the case when statistics are summoned at the service of a preconceived notion, the data provided is highly selective, contradictory, or irrelevant. Of course, no one would deny that cars and airplanes are safer now than they were seventy years ago, or that life expectancy is generally increasing thanks to advances in public health among other things. But that is a moot point, and it would hardly sell any copies. It is not what Pinker has in mind: his argument is that scientific and technological advances automatically spill into moral and political progress, so much so that progress really

¹ Even this review is the result of a bias exposed on page 48: “Experiments have shown that a critic who pans a book is perceived as more competent than a critic who praises it.” Having failed to enroll in a debiasing program, I hope the reader will pardon my incapacity to raise above my own cognitive limitations.

defines the totality of the modern human experience. More importantly, as we shall see, Pinker also believes that any urge to interfere with the course of progress is misconceived, because it is based on delusional notions that are contradicted by data.

Pinker proceeds by disaggregating “progress” into a series of discrete issues that can be measured. As he tells us, “progress consists of unbundling the features of a social process” in order to reengineer each of them independently of the others (94), seemingly unaware that what makes a process social is precisely the fact that it cannot be unbundled, or at least not without major disruptions. *Enlightenment Now* is symptomatic of a geeky *Zeitgeist* in which “secrets of production” are “unlocked” and everything has a ‘code’ that can be ‘hacked,’ if only politics gave free rein to venture philanthropists and angel investors. The various dimensions of progress range from basic indicators such as life expectancy and health to social and political issues such as democracy or international peace. Reading the next fifteen chapters becomes rapidly monotonous, as they all proceed to show that no matter which indicator we choose, we have never had it so good. It is impossible, within the limits of a review, to discuss each of them, but since the readers of H-Diplo are presumably more interested in international affairs, I will discuss the chapter on peace, which is a good example of how Pinker proceeds everywhere else in the book.²

You may think that war has now become ubiquitous and that we live in an age of pervasive political violence. Think again. Pinker argues that the world has become a more peaceful place. Three charts support his claim: the first tracks the percentage of years of great power wars for every year between 1500 and 2015, which shows a steady decline. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this statistical trend—except that it captures a phenomenon that has been less and less representative of warfare. It also leaves out forms of extreme violence that were not included in the legal concept of “war” but which were nonetheless characteristic of the period covered by Pinker’s chart, in particular wars of conquest, colonization, and extermination. And just as wars with entities excluded from the European legal order were not considered wars, neither were wars tearing apart sovereign entities, i.e. civil wars. Their number has increased in inverse proportion to the number of inter-state wars and exploded in the twentieth century. None of this is reflected in the data. Yet, even taking the chart at face value, it still would not tell us anything about the devastation caused by war, simply because the nature of what we call “war” has changed overtime, from being a rather limited and highly codified kind of duel between regular armies to the total wars of the twentieth century. In other words, the decline in the number of wars opposing nation states is perfectly compatible with an increase of war-related violence. A second chart reports battle deaths since 1945. Why 1945? Well, including two atrocious global wars generating tens of millions of casualties would not serve the argument of a secular trend in the reduction of war casualties. And it certainly serves the book better than using the “Global deaths in conflict since the year 1400” published by the very website from which Pinker gleans his data: indeed, *that* chart shows that for the year 2000, the combined military+civilian death rate is back exactly at where it was in... 1400.³ If that does not look like progress to you, maybe it is because it is not. The final chart in the chapter shows the number of

² Some chapters are obviously restating the obvious: thus no one would deny that terrorism represents a statistically insignificant threat on contemporary societies or that safety has improved. But these are exceptions in a series of otherwise counterintuitive arguments.

³ Max Roser, “Global deaths in conflicts since the year 1400,” <https://ourworldindata.org/slides/war-and-violence/#/6>.

“genocide deaths” since 1955, and it has “juddered down a steep sawtooth.” Except that “genocide” here includes the killing of civilian populations by their own government or other civilian groups—a fuzzy definition dramatically expanding on the already difficult United Nations (UN) definition and which includes a hodgepodge of situations (like the “killing of political enemies in Vietnam 1965-1975”) and excludes others (the invasion of East Timor), preventing a significant comparison over a longer time-frame. Simply put, the result is meaningless. Pinker’s conjectures about violence in ancient times have been thoroughly refuted by anthropologist Brian Ferguson and it is all the more surprising to find them repeated here.⁴ Finally, “peace” is not just the absence of war: it is a positive condition. Surviving or not being killed in a war does not mean that one lives in peace. A contemporary figure of the war victim is the refugee, and it would be hard to describe the explosion of the number of refugees in the world as progress—between 2006 and 2016, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the number of refugees has shot up from 9.8 to 17.1 million.⁵ But then, they are conspicuously absent from Pinker’s disquisition about war and peace.

Finessed statistics are the stock-in-trade of *Enlightenment Now* and it would take a companion volume to expose the biases and fallacies of its “data.” Yet, it would be a mistake to focus too much on it. Pinker tries to flummox his readers with figures and charts in order to conceal a deeper argument running under the cover of the book’s statistical *trompe-l’oeil*. This is where history comes into play. There is indeed an explanation for progress and it can be captured in one sentence: “The Enlightenment has worked” (321). Over two centuries, its ideas have shaped the world we live in. If the world is more peaceful, it is because Immanuel Kant wrote *Perpetual Peace* and “after World War II ... the pacifying forces identified by Kant and others were systematically put into place” (162). If we are wealthier and safer today, it is because “gentle commerce” has replaced “the zero-sum plundering of land” (169). If we are more knowledgeable and democratic, it is because Enlightenment “ideas trickled down from a thin stratum of philosophers and intellectuals to the educated upper classes, particularly liberal professionals” (210) and presumably Harvard professors. Ideas move people, “practical men and women and madmen in authority are affected, directly or indirectly, by the world of ideas (...) They read intellectual magazines, if only in dentists’ waiting rooms.” (349).

Unfortunately, it looks like Pinker’s dentist does not subscribe to historical journals but only to *Wired*. The book is replete with factual mistakes and outlandish claims. To mention just a few: Rousseau was not a romantic Counter-Enlightenment figure for whom “peace and prosperity were [not] desirable ends” (30); although he was no rabid anti-Semite, Max Weber was not an “assimilated German Jew” (85); nowhere has Michel Foucault argued that “the Holocaust was the inevitable culmination of a ‘bio-politics *that began with the Enlightenment*’” (397, emphasis mine) and he actually wrote an important *defense* of the Enlightenment and the Kantian tradition, which he claimed as his own.⁶ Such canards, however, should not detract us from

⁴ See for instance Brian Ferguson, “Pinker’s List: Exaggerating Prehistoric War Mortality,” in Douglas P. Fry, ed., *War, Peace and Human Nature: The Convergence of Evolutionary and Cultural Views* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁵ UNHCR *Global Trends—Forced Displacement in 2016 Report*, table 25, <http://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2016/> (last accessed 11 May 2018).

⁶ Michel Foucault, « Qu'est-ce que les Lumières? » in *Dits et Ecrits IV* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), pp. 562-578.

the more problematic confusion that undergirds Pinker's narrative: his vision of what constitutes the Enlightenment is highly idiosyncratic and its connection to the historical record tenuous, to say the least. Pinker takes as intellectual pillars of the Enlightenment elements that emerged later but also, decisively, *in reaction* to it. In an early chapter, he suggests that there are three modern ideas that Enlightenment thinkers could not have had but that are offshoots of the tradition they represent: entropy, evolution, and information. Any historian of science and technology or economic thought will immediately recognize a conceptual package that has transformed beyond recognition the notion of reason away from its Enlightenment origins.⁷ Enlightenment thinkers believed in a deliberative *reason*, which is utterly different and in many ways opposed to the algorithmic *rationality* of twentieth-century economic theory, later imported into evolutionary biology.⁸ With cybernetics, "the principles of information, computation, and control [that] bridge the chasm between the physical world of cause and effect and the mental world of knowledge, intelligence and purpose" (22). This, in turn, led to new images of the brain as a computing machine, a statistical decision device using "neural networks... to engage in information processing or computation" (21), a vision which is today at the center of cognitive neuroscience and economics. But because it is a statistical machine, its nature is not different from the wider neural networks into which it is plugged: in fact, it is a mere node in a super-human information processor, which in modern parlance is called the Market. Pinker seems to ignore the fact that the vision of human brains as intrinsically limited nodes of a gigantic mechanism that operates as a natural selector of information is a modern vision that grew out of the neoliberal *critique* of the Enlightenment.⁹ It is *against* what they saw as a hubristic faith in human reason *inherited from the Enlightenment* that Austrian economists attacked socialism and planning, and more generally any effort to govern the economy: the global market is essentially unknowable to the human mind.¹⁰ It, and only it, has perfect information and full rationality. Tinkering with it can only lead to disaster. When Pinker talks about the market—which is often but always in passing—the reader is served a story that starts with Adam Smith but curiously ends up sounding like Friedrich Hayek (who indeed pops up in the endnote reference): "market economics, in addition to reaping the benefits of specialization and providing incentives for people to produce things that other people want, solve the problem of coordinating the efforts of hundreds of millions of people by using prices to propagate information (...) a computational problem that no planner is brilliant enough to solve from a central bureau" (90). One thus should not be surprised if despite paying lip-service to reason and rationalism, Pinker can admit in the same breath that most people are not rational after all (their opinions are "too shallow and uninformed to fit into a coherent ideology" 371).

We now see why a potted history of the Enlightenment is so central to Pinker's argument: if the Enlightenment ideas have worked so far, it means that there is no reason they will not work in the future and

⁷ See in particular Philip Mirowski, *Machine Dreams: Economics Becomes a Cyborg Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Paul Erickson et al. *How Reason Almost Lost Its Mind: The Strange Career of Cold War Rationality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

⁸ Paul Erickson, *The World the Game Theorists Made* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁹ On the neoliberal critique of the Enlightenment, see the observations in Judith Shklar, *After Utopia: The Decline of Political Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

¹⁰ Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), in particular 224-233.

it would be foolish and presumptuous to try to meddle with the majestic course of progress. What the book is in effect advocating is a form of political quietism in the face of the most important challenges of our time. For there are indeed problems that seem so intractable and pressing that they would warrant an urgent revision of our social, political, and economic choices: climate change and socioeconomic inequalities, in particular. Data on these issues can be quite disheartening—even though Pinker works his magic spin again on a number of graphs¹¹—and one could easily be tempted to *do something about it*. This is where Pinker’s loosely connected observations about progress, about data, about cognitive biases and about the ineffable and unknowable power of the market to select technological solutions come together as an ideological argument in favor of the status quo and against political alternatives.

It is because we see things through our own limited, cognitively biased perspective, or because we are influenced by the jeremiads of the “enemies of the Enlightenment” and their allies in the media that we are tempted to meddle with the course of progress. But for Pinker the only picture is the big picture: big data is where reality and rationality are to be found. Mining it is the only way toward truth and intellectual redemption, which is why we should not trust people’s opinions and anything that does not look like a PowerPoint chart. The only thing that matters is aggregate figures. For instance, we are told that child mortality decreases globally—which is true. But in the United States it has decreased way less than in other wealthy countries. This does not matter, according to Pinker, because everybody is better off anyway (Pareto optimality, which Pinker sees everywhere, infuses the book). However, anyone who disaggregated the data will uncover important social and geographical disparities that raise the question of whose progress Pinker is really talking about: in some areas of the U.S.—Alabama, for instance—child mortality has *recently increased*.¹² The same kind of reasoning goes on, more forcefully, throughout the chapter on inequalities. Pinker is adamant that “despite the anxiety about rising inequality within Western countries, inequality in the world is declining” (105). And where there are rising inequalities, they are perfectly acceptable because “a rising tide lifts all the boats” and everybody is presumably better off because “inequality should decline” eventually (103), although one suspects it is better to be on the luxury yacht rather than on a crowded and leaky lifeboat in order to ride the swell, especially if the decline of inequality fails to materialize.

There is a lot that is wrong with this line of thinking. But what is truly disturbing is not so much the methodological fallacies due to scale as their ethical implications: the ‘big picture’ rhetoric obfuscates massive disparities but it also denies their systemic character. Pinker does not accept that under many of the economic arrangements that define capitalism, if some are better off, it means that others are necessarily worse off (he calls that “a folk theory of economics as zero-sum competition” 334), and that these others are often the same ones. A remarkable feature of *Enlightenment Now* is indeed its history without historical agents and without power, in which “science,” “reason,” “capitalism” or “industrialism” dispense their benefits to an ungrateful mankind. It is not the organized working classes that wrested concessions from capital but “capitalist

¹¹ Thus, the chart on page 143, which shows a decrease of carbon *intensity* since 1980, i.e. of the CO2 emissions per dollar of GDP. But the increase of global production also means that this seemingly reassuring chart conceals an explosion of carbon emissions. Or the eerily linear graph on page 133 showing a steady increase of the surface of terrestrial and maritime protected areas: Pinker seems to assume that it reflects an improvement of environmental conditions, when it probably reflects the exact contrary, i.e. the need for more protected enclosures because conditions are deteriorating at an alarming rate in most habitats.

¹² CDC, National Center for Health Statistics, “Stats of the States—Alabama,” 13 April 2018, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/states/alabama/alabama.htm> (last accessed 11 May 2018).

societies” that spent on welfare; it is not the conquest of social and economic rights but “industrial capitalism” that “launched the Great Escape from universal poverty in the 19th century and is rescuing the rest of humankind in a Great Convergence in the 21st” (364). The result is a warped vision in which those who do not partake in the benefits of progress are simply not seeing things as they should and any politics based on them would not be “evidence-based” and thus flawed. In the heydays of Stalinism, such considerations were denounced as ‘subjectivism’—and so, it seems, under high neoliberalism. If you are an Alabama mother who lost her child because of the social effects of economic and racial inequality in a dysfunctional health care system, it may be too bad, but in the great scheme of things you should find solace in the beautiful trade-off of which you are the losing end. If you have just lost your home to a foreclosure, you are probably too emotional to see that “we” have globally become wealthier. Or could it be that it is because you are irrational in the first place that the market—the greatest natural selector of all for Hayek and, it seems, Pinker himself—has selected you out? Who knows? And who cares? You cannot stop progress.

The problem is that the kind of inequalities that Pinker so forcefully denies usually compound themselves: economic inequalities tend to generate disparities in education, health, environmental quality of life, etc. that have a stubborn capacity to reproduce themselves overtime, thus impairing individual autonomy for entire groups of people—something that anyone claiming to defend the ideals of the Enlightenment should be concerned about. To be fair, Pinker acknowledges that there can be some real issues with inequality here and there: for instance, “it’s true that the world’s poor have gotten richer in part at the expense of the American lower middle classes.” But again, this is irrelevant because it is a distraction from exhibit A: “as citizens of the world, considering humanity as a whole, we have to say that the tradeoff was worth it” (113). The problem is that some people just do not manage to upgrade to these cosmopolitan and admittedly more rational vistas. And this could potentially lead some otherwise perfectly rational global citizens to appease these “populists” by trying to correct socioeconomic inequalities—which is exactly what Pinker wants to avoid. Data in hand, he proceeds to explain that populism is only a bunch of grouchy old folks in their retirement homes.¹³ Demographics will take care of populism, it is just a matter of waiting out the wave. And because “economic insecurity is not the driver” behind the resentment of these victims of progress, “the strategies of reducing income inequality and of talking to laid-off steelworkers and trying to feel their pain, however praiseworthy, will probably be ineffective.” In the meantime, it may be best not to ruffle them too much with ill-considered forms of identity politics (342). Written in the context of Trump’s America, post-Brexit, and the electoral successes of populist forces in Europe, what Pinker writes about populism and inequalities is politically irresponsible at best and cynical at worst.

The same quietism is in order in environmental matters. We do not have to change our way of life or reconsider our mode of production: “the tradeoff that pits human well-being against environmental damage can be renegotiated by technology” (124). In Pinker’s brave new world, if we let the problem-solving powers of science and technology deploy unfettered by a “review bureaucracy [that] has swollen far beyond its mission” (402), the marketplace of ideas will soon be flush with solutions to the problem of securing sufficient food for a growing population while diminishing the impact of agriculture on the environment: “genetically modified organisms, hydroponics, aeroponics, urban vertical farms, robotic harvesting, meat cultured in vitro, artificial intelligence algorithms fed by GPS and biosensors, the recovery of energy and fertilizer from sewage, aquaculture with fish that eat tofu instead of other fish...” (128). At this stage, you may be thinking that perhaps something is wrong if a day comes when you cannot tell an aquarium from a

¹³ “Populism is an old man’s movement” (341).

bowl of miso soup, but by now Pinker has also explained that intellectuals like yourself are guilty of adopting double standards exempting them from what they prescribe for the rest of humanity. So keep your doubts to yourself, be a good global citizen and pass on the soy sauce. There is a lot more to stomach in Pinker's "eco-modernism," such as his enthusiasm for the "fracking revolution" (126), which will ensure that we will be swimming in oil for some time. This abundant supply of polluting energy will be managed efficiently by the market, since the trading of carbon credits will take care of finding the optimal balance between production and pollution. Fourth-generation nuclear plants and planetary-scale geoengineering will take care of the rest. Everything is going to be just fine.

Why then, you may wonder, write such a long book to defend progress when it works so well on its own? It is because, like all seemingly inevitable historical trends, progress risks being sabotaged by people who spread false ideas about it. *Enlightenment Now* is a long indictment of the cultural ills that risk derailing the course of progress according to Pinker. The list is long, but essentially it can be summed up by the "demonization of science in the liberal arts programs" (401),¹⁴ the Marxist professors who teach these programs (403), the authors they assign (Pinker gets particularly animated when it comes to Foucault, Walter Benjamin, Frantz Fanon, Friedrich Nietzsche, Theodor Adorno, and a few others...), and, above all, the intellectuals, who are guilty of condoning dictatorships, entertaining double-standards about consumerism, denying the advancement of human rights, being "innumerate," criticizing industrialism, rejecting the validity of IQ tests, embracing Marxism, adopting Nietzsche's ideas, confusing moral seriousness with pessimism, embracing romantic militarism, toying with genocide, and so on. The book exudes anti-intellectualism from all its pores, and its last chapters are a long and disheveled rant—think Andrey Vyshinsky giving a TED Talk—against everything Pinker does not like. One wonders what could possibly have upset the man so much. Does he feel snubbed by intellectuals (but then, there is something inherently self-contradictory in thriving to become the organic intellectual of Silicon Valley)? Could it be because another linguist and cognitive psychologist, Noam Chomsky, retains more academic and political clout defending positions that are diametrically opposed to Pinker's?¹⁵ It's hard to say, but for sure the only real obstacle to progress, according to Pinker, has nothing to do with impending environmental catastrophe, social upheavals, wars, and the like: it is located in the humanities and their "clerisy." Yet, this can be fixed too: cognitive "debiasing programs" can help put students back on the right path (378). And the humanities, which suffer from the self-inflicted wounds of "postmodernism," "obscurantism," "relativism," and "political correctness" (406), can be saved by becoming a subset of the cognitive sciences: for does everything not originate in the brain? Cognitive psychologists, behavioral geneticists, and neuroscientists could thus help "innumerate" political theorists or impaired literary scholars think better about "human nature," which is what political theory and literature are about (407). "What would happen over the long run if a standard college curriculum devoted less attention to the writings of Karl Marx and Fanon and more to the quantitative analyses of political violence?" Pinker asks candidly (405). One wonders indeed, but *Enlightenment Now* gives us a taste of what this sorry state of affairs would

¹⁴ Pinker suggests that the Tuskegee syphilis study was only "a one-time failure to prevent harm" that may have been "defensible by the standards of the day." 401

¹⁵ Pinker clearly has a beef with Noam Chomsky: in a passage about the power of ideas, he slyly notes that "Osama Bin Laden... owned a book by Noam Chomsky" and leaves it at that (443).

look like: not only would the measure of political violence become meaningless, for lack of a historical understanding of its changing nature, but some of its specific forms would become entirely invisible.

Much of what Pinker writes about the humanities would be a comical caricature if it did not represent a coherent ideological offensive that is reshaping higher education and research.¹⁶ Like general systems theory in the 1950s or logical positivism in the 1920s, the cognitive sciences are yet another pipe dream of unification of the social and the natural sciences, with the humanities now thrown in for good measure. Like these prior attempts, they will probably fail, but in the process of reshaping the intellectual and academic landscape, they are imposing a new standard in the construction of what counts as knowledge. This standard is based on an increasingly seamless integration between cognition and economics that in large part reflects a new social organization of knowledge. Under this new regime, data points and factoids gleaned on the internet, evidence and visual effects, scientific proof and a TED Talk, and validity and celebrity often risk getting hopelessly blurred. There is nothing wrong with “evidence-based” research, which is why Steven Pinker should be held to its demanding standards, including the very Kantian one of understanding its limitations (Kant called it the “critical” use of reason—something Pinker does not seem to like very much). Not all important questions can be answered in such terms. Evidence is not always easy to define, nor is it always quantifiable. Bringing the issues of life and death, war and peace, population and poverty, race and inequality into a PowerPoint-like narrative of universal and linear human progress that dispenses with the complexities of history and politics is meaningless. Suggesting that these complexities *must* be dispensed with because they prevent us from seeing progress is a fraud. Yet, one quickly realizes that Pinker’s Enlightenment is made of plasterboard and that the progress that runs through it is one mile wide only because, like *Enlightenment Now*, it is one inch deep.

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¹⁶ See Philip Mirowski, *Science Mart: Privatizing American Science* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).