

Are We Making Progress? – A Conservative Estimate

by Graham Cunningham (October 2014)

A chance conversation with a colleague, a few days ago, about some latest manifestation of political correctness: “The trouble with you conservatives” he said “is that it’s all doom and gloom with you. You’re addicted to it.” My initial reaction: “Me?..gloomy!...Breath of Spring, Me.” But then, on reflection, the thought occurred that maybe he had a point. Maybe the grimace of the conservative, as he looks out on a rising tide of intellectual fashion or an ebbing away of some cherished traditional social mores, is only a kind of sea-sickness. Maybe his distaste at what he observes is as out-of-balance and unrealistic as the latest ‘progressive’ cause célèbre of the p.c. fashionista that he so despises. One thinks of the *Serenity Poem*...cheerfully accepting ‘the things you cannot change’; in this case, the philosophical incontinence of some of your fellow men.

For any reasonably educated, reasonably sane citizen of any Western nation – anyone with even the most basic grasp of history and flimsiest awareness of what are currently the worst places on earth – it would be curmudgeonly not to recognise that life, for us, is pretty good and has been for a good long time. The more reflective might occasionally ponder whether the quantity of human happiness does actually expand to fit the quantity of propitious circumstance or whether happiness is more in the way of a self-levelling constant. But this sort of mind-game too is not, in itself, unpleasant. Maybe progressive optimism and conservative pessimism are both – in the case of comfortable Western man – just alternative psychological ‘lifestyle choices’ and pessimism of this kind is, plainly, quite a different thing from that, say, of the inhabitants of a village facing a very real threat of genocidal annihilation.

Progressive vs conservative intellectual discourse was given an apparent sharp tilt to the left a couple of years back by the publication, in 2011, of Steven Pinker’s widely acclaimed *The Better Angels of Our Nature* – a tour de force of evidence-rich, cheerfully eloquent prose, that demonstrates convincingly that we – mankind that is – are becoming progressively less violent and that this trend can – albeit with some temporary reversals – be traced all the way back to the dawn of civilisation. In a clutch of enthusiastic (sometimes ecstatic) reviews, right across a spectrum from *The Guardian* to *The Wall Street Journal*, the book has been cited – with, it must be said, no small encouragement from Steven Pinker himself – as a philosophical game changer. [This assessment](#) gives the flavour: *Better Angels* is “a monumental

achievement” that “should make it much harder for pessimists [read conservatives] to cling to their gloomy vision of the future.”

Pinker’s 800 pages of evidence is indeed good news for all of us mankind. But the hype surrounding it accords *Better Angels* a philosophical significance that it does not really have. It postulates what is in effect a giant Aunt Sally – that most people have a misplaced pessimism about the future – focussed on man’s inhumanity to man – and he then mounts an 800 page demolition of it. “Believe it or not” (his first paragraph opines) “– and I know that most people do not – violence has declined over long stretches of time...”. “Most people,” he suggests a few paragraphs further on, will be inclined to greet his revelations with “scepticism, incredulity and sometimes anger.” But how does he know what most people do, or do not believe, in this regard? I for one have never entertained this idea of a historic growth of violence and neither, I suspect, have most people with a reasonably developed interest in history. And people with the kind of *Daily Mail*, “Oh my God, what on earth are things coming to” perspective are unlikely to be his readership anyway. But the really skewiff thread of the argument is when he starts to speculate (about 600 pages in) that his statistics on the more recent downward trends in violence can best be explained as resulting from the so-called “Rights Revolution.” And this – his scholarly naivety – has much more muddied than cleared the stream of progressive/conservative discourse.

Mankind may be progressing but that does not mean that this is down to our much vaunted 19-21st century philosophies of “progress.” If ever they isolate a credulousness gene they will likely find it in the DNA of people like Steven Pinker. Happily for him, he is one of those who take the recent “Rights Revolution” – one his “Six Trends” that help to account for the decline of violence – entirely at face value. A campaigner for “social justice” is, to Pinker, simply driven by a desire for ...“social justice.” “Gay rights” and “anti racist” campaigners are simply dovish souls just wanting to be accepted for what they are. The conservative, however, is likely to also detect a souring whiff of cant; he notices the champagne in the socialist, the thought-policeman in the “gay pride” marcher, the racist in the anti-racist, the have-your-cake-and-eat-it coquetry in the Cosmopolitan feminist. He is likely to exclaim to the pages of his *Better Angels* book: “Yes but souls like *Me* – throughout all of history – probably *never were* violent, *never were* misogynistic, *never did* join a mob.” Just as when, on the tv news, he hears that the violent street protest was “caused” by x,y or z, he will exclaim: “No! It was caused by people with a mob mentality.”

What then of the conservative’s alternative perception: that the human condition – in terms of the affairs of the heart, of the interplay of desire and fear, of the capacity for what used

to be called “good” and “evil” – is fundamentally unchanging? The skepticism that fills the columns (and comment threads) of conservative media, on both sides of the Atlantic, is not in fact especially about violence or even about the long term fate of humanity. It is skepticism about the chances that swathes of one’s fellow men in the here and now will ever emerge from their lefty p.c. arrested adolescence and grow up; for that is what the politically correct version of “progress” is really about. Ever since Rousseau – ever since Marx – it has been an essentially middle-aged-adolescent mind-game driven by some kind of sublimated, parent-hating anger. Not surprisingly – and forgivably – succeeding generations of *real* adolescents have lapped it up in spades; at least until they eventually grow up (some of them anyway). Thus have their phoney rhetorical utopias been amazingly seductive to the modern consciousness, especially in their hijacking of ego-flattering, nice sounding words like *progress* and *radical*. Even more seductive in the modern left- liberal version of reality is the crude rhetorical division of humanity into an – axiomatically blameless – “vast majority of thoroughly decent folk” contrasted with a “tiny minority” of bad guys, typically “the rich,” “imperialists” or “reactionaries.”

Whereas the conservative is unlikely to identify himself as part of some great indiscriminating “we,” progressing or otherwise. He is circumspect and sceptical. At his best he aspires to be a wiser but not necessarily any less cheerful soul than his “progressive” neighbour. He is unlikely to grab the megaphone to tell you all about it.

For these reasons and more conservatism has mostly been asleep for most of the last 200 years allowing “progressives” a clear run through the commanding heights of the burgeoning mass education and mass media establishments. So much so that now, to voice the unbelievable truth – that crass “progressive” progress is mostly counter-productive (Mao was a real first rank “progressive”) and that real human advances tend to happen *in spite of*, not *because of* it – seems paradoxical and invites blank disbelief. Conservatism is currently in full retreat throughout the Western world and is in dire need of somehow finding a new way to express its positive alternative vision.

Certainly some conservative pessimism about progress is mere grumpiness and some of it – just like its counterpart in the infinitely larger “progressive” media – is 21st century-style tribal bigotry. But at its best, it is a wry observation – based on close observation of friends and enemies, family and colleagues, literature and “current affairs” – that there are and always will be, honesty and self delusion, real and faux expressions of generosity of spirit, bullies dressed up as champions of liberty...wise men and fools, in other words. The conservative may also have taken note from his reading of history that progress – real

improvements in the quality of life of the average man or woman – mostly spring from man's technological ingenuity rather than his ideological mind games.

Graham Cunningham is a retired British architect. He is also a writer of occasional essays – and even more occasional poems – on aspects of political correctness and mass media group think. His work has been published in a number of online journals in Britain and the USA.

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