STEVEN PINKER SPEAKS AT OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

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On April 9, 2012, Oakland University welcomed to campus Steven Pinker of Harvard University for a presentation in the Varner Vitality Lecture Series. Professor Pinker is a professor of psychology and a cognitive neuroscientist, but his research touches on a number of disciplines, including linguistics, history, anthropology, biology, and political science. He has won both scholarly and wider general acclaim for his work. Two of his books have been short-listed to the Pulitzer Prize and *Time Magazine* named him one of "100 Most Influential People in the World." Professor Pinker was one of several well-known speakers—including Thomas Friedman, John Mueller, and Richard Dawkins—to speak at Oakland in the past year, and his talk was widely anticipated as a major intellectual event on campus.

Although Professor Pinker's work is probably best known among students majoring in psychology or linguistics, his most recent book—*The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*—strikes closer to my discipline, political science. I had read several reviews of this book—I confess that I do not have the time to read all the books that strike me as worthwhile—and I found its fundamental thesis provocative. In contrast to the innumerable works that tell us how bad things have become or the dreary future we can anticipate, here was a study dedicated to arguing that we are actually living in the most

peaceful time period in human history—a "cheerful view of mass violence" in the words of the *New York Review of Books*. This is, of course, a broad and potentially provocative claim—certainly one that most people, besieged with reports of murders, rapes, terrorism, and mass atrocities in faraway lands—may not easily believe. Pinker himself suggests that his work focuses on "the most significant and least appreciated development in the history of our species."

Having him on campus was just too good of an opportunity to pass up. Unfortunately, I realized that his Monday evening talk coincided with the penultimate session of my political science capstone seminar, which met only once a week. I wrestled with the wisdom of surrendering the class session, but my decision to forego the class was assisted by several students, who, unprovoked by me, asked if we might go as a class to hear his talk. Given the choice between Pinker and myself, the answer, I knew, was clear, and at 7:15 on April 9th Political Science 472 headed over to the OC Banquet Rooms to join a capacity crowd waiting for Pinker's talk to begin.

Invariably, I lost a few stragglers along the way—in the end, their loss. Pinker's talk was an hour long summary of his book, complete with numerous pictures, graphs and charts. He covered a diverse range of topics, ranging from violence among primitive peoples, murder rates in Europe over the centuries, contemporary warfare and genocide, and a discussion of the expansion of rights to include women, minorities, homosexuals, and even animals. The overall thesis is that humans have become more peaceful and tolerant over time, best understood as the fact that the probability of meeting a violent end at the hand of a fellow human is lower than ever before. Pinker's core arguments about why this is so boiled down to a series of political, economic, and social developments—the rise of the state to end the "nasty, brutish, and short" Hobbesian state of nature, the spread of Enlightenment ideals about civilization, literacy (which sparks feelings of empathy), global trade (creating more positive-sum interactions), democracy, and even nuclear weapons, which have, arguably, prevented

major power conflict in the past sixty-plus years. Warfare is less frequent and less deadly; slavery is no more; and even domestic violence has declined. True, there have been horrific events in the past century—world wars, genocides, civil wars that have claimed the lives of millions—but, Pinker would claim, fewer people *proportionally* (a key claim) died violently in the 20th century than in ancient or medieval times (think of the Hundred Years' War, the Mongol invasions, civil strife under various Chinese dynasties).

There are, of course, numerous objections to Pinker's core claims. The fact that the sixty million dead from World War II is *proportionally* less than the deathcount from previous large scale conflicts is not wholly reassuring, and the fact that we are still less than a century removed from Hitler, Mao, and Stalin makes it a little premature, perhaps, to claim that we, as a species, are more peaceful or more civilized than before. At present, mass atrocities, including rape as a weapon and politically-caused famines, continue in places such as Congo and Somalia, but Pinker would no doubt claim these are exceptional places that lack the infrastructure of the state, a prerequisite for a more peaceful order. In other words, Pinker is NOT making a grand claim, as E. O. Wilson and others subscribing to sociobiology might, that natural selection favors groups that are more cooperative and thus we have literally "evolved" to become more peaceful. Colleagues from Religious Studies were disappointed in his talk, as they objected that there was no mention of religion as a force that has contributed to peace—hardly surprising as Pinker himself believes that religion and moral claims are responsible for most of the violence in human history. A Marxist might argue that the global system of capitalism is, in its own way, a system of violence. The fact that we blithely live with fear of nuclear annihilation can hardly be reassuring. More people are enslaved—both in manual/domestic labor and for sexual purposes—than ever before in human history, although, I imagine, it might be *proportionally* less than, say, in the eighteenth century. Racism and xenophobia remain widespread.

Some faculty colleagues found his data were too superficial and impressionistic, and I found his arguments about the "democratic peace" wanting since even though we have yet to see two democracies go to war with each other, there were plenty of examples of democracies—including our own—initiating and escalating conflict.

This piece, however, is not primarily intended as a critique of Pinker. Rather, it is about my (and, perhaps, your) students, who attentively sat through the talk and, in one case, asked Pinker an informed and thoughtful question. Afterwards, there was a reception over coffee and dessert and I sat with many of them to discuss what they had just heard. This was, notwithstanding the lecture itself, perhaps the most eye-opening part of the evening for me because the students, to their credit, were, to a person, fully engaged. Having a background in history and political science and possessing some skills in data analysis and interpretation, they were delighted that they were able to follow the talk. I do not know exactly what they anticipated, but, given Pinker's credentials and some of the hype surrounding him, perhaps they expected the material to be over their head. In any event, they were pleased that they were able to understand and appreciate his points. While they respected his data and sweeping historical approach, most, it seemed, were not wholly convinced—maybe things were better, but, from their point of view, it would be hard to say that human beings are fundamentally peaceful or that we have successfully crafted institutions to restrain our violent impulses. The cases of Rwanda, Bosnia, Darfur, and Syria—to say nothing of World War II and the Holocaust—were very much of their minds. One, borrowing from a point I make in many of my classes, suggested that if Germany—the most scientifically advanced and literate society in the first half of the twentieth century—could perpetuate the Holocaust, any talk of "progress" with respect to violence seemed ridiculous. Others noted how contemporary mass culture in many ways glorifies violence and that, even it is true that we might commit fewer violent crimes than in the past, some sort of "bloodlust" lingers not far beneath the sur-

face, easily seen in language used today against Muslims. And a few, with memory of some of the survey evidence we had reviewed in class, were very doubtful that "tolerance" or respect for rights of others was widespread across the planet. Still, in contrast to the "Clash of Civilizations" type of argument that is more familiar to political science students, Pinker's more optimistic take was something novel to chew on for a bit (as we did with free food on offer!).

At the risk of sounding patronizing or unengaged with my students, the fact that I could sit down with these students and discuss something of major intellectual and scholarly import—with no threat of an exam on the topic hanging over them or no grade on the line—for an extended period of time was refreshing. I remember a colleague several years ago suggesting that the difference between an Oakland student and a student at say, MIT, was that the former came to your office to discuss a grade, whereas the latter came to discuss an idea. I have not taught at MIT or its ilk so cannot speak to the veracity of this claim, but I imagine that this may be, broadly speaking, accurate. However, for this evening at any rate the students dispelled my colleague's more cynical perspective. One student summed it up best (and here I have to paraphrase as I did not take notes). She said that this event, for her, was what she envisioned a university was all about, and that she really felt "intellectual" for going to this event. I also believe—if memory serves—that she said it was "cool" to attend such a talk and, afterwards, discuss with her professor and classmates different points of view about it. While we met as a class only one time afterward, I would like to think that as a group we benefited from attending the talk together and having some time to reflect upon it.

I know these speakers are typically rather expensive, and some of us can quibble over what we heard that evening. However, I think comments such as those made by the students testify to the value of these events—both for individuals and for us as a community of learners—and the success that Oakland is having in using these fora not only to promote the university but also to boost the intellectual climate on campus.