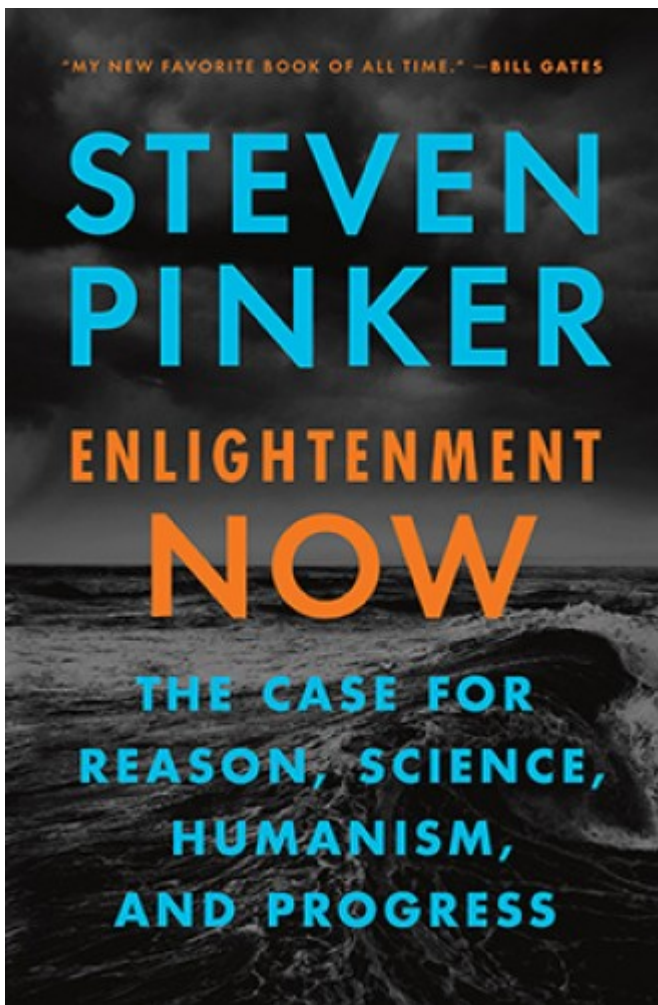


Steven Pinker's absolute faith in reason

"This is not a book of Enlightenolatry," writes Pinker. But it is.

by [Andrew Finstuen](#) in the [July 4, 2018](#) issue

In Review



Enlightenment Now

The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress

By Steven Pinker

Viking

Steven Pinker's book is a polemic, although he claims the opposite: "This is not a book of Enlightenolatry." But by his account, the Enlightenment and its values of reason, science, humanism, and progress have provided the "objective standards" necessary for human flourishing. They have exposed the ignorance and delusion of religion, politics, mysticism, and any other approach to the world not governed by data gathered through reason and science. These principles have advanced health, wealth, peace, equal rights, knowledge, quality of life, and happiness. For Pinker, the forward march of history is a glorious story backed by mountains of data and graphs all pointing in the right directions.

But data does not tell stories; interpretation does. Pinker's interpretations flatten legitimate disputes about a variety of topics, from the value of crops engineered by the Green Revolution to the benefits of social media. His inattention to counterpoint is often joined to a callous presentation of the progress he wants to deface. For instance, he says poor people "are likely to be as overweight as their employers and dressed in the same fleece, sneakers, and jeans," a bizarre statement of the modern abundance of food and clothing. He also notes all poor people also own air conditioners. Warren Buffet "may have more air conditioners than most people" but "the fact that a majority of poor Americans even have an air conditioner is astonishing."

This narrative setup presents the Enlightenment as the arbiter of all things good. "Most people," he writes, "agree that life is better than death. Health is better than sickness. . . . Abundance is better than poverty. Peace is better than war. . . . Happiness is better than misery." Who could ever argue with that? And that is precisely the point. Pinker does not want argument. The Enlightenment is "timeless," "nonpolitical," "benevolent," and the truth. These claims mark his argument as ahistorical and ideological.

This bias frames the Enlightenment as a sharp break from the miserable dark ages. At best, such a perspective tells a partial truth. Historians have often countered this simplistic narrative with attention to the 12th-century renaissance; the interdependence of faith, reason, and humanism in the 15th- and 16th-century Renaissance and the Reformation; and the religious contributions to the scientific revolution.

Pinker blames Karl Marx, Joseph Stalin, and Mao Zedong for most of the 20th century's catastrophes, ignoring Marx's use of Enlightenment principles like the critique of religion and the rationalization of the economy. In reality, Marx and his communist legacy cannot be divorced from the Enlightenment and its complex historical shadow.

And he treats other shadows just as obliquely. He admits that some of the Enlightenment figures "were racists, sexists, anti-Semites, slaveholders, or duelists." Yet, he avers, these "daffy ideas" emerged with "brilliant ones." These figures were, furthermore, hardly accountable because "if you're committed to progress, you can't very well claim to have it all figured out." This sort of evasion dominates the book. At one point, Pinker calls for a "more contextualized understanding" of the Enlightenment's role in antiprogressivism. That would be a good start.

The chapter on climate change is characterized by mental gymnastics. Pinker reports that the contemporary world generates "38 billion tons" of carbon dioxide each year, increasing the amount in the atmosphere from "270 parts per million before the Industrial Revolution to more than 400 parts today." He goes on to celebrate reductions in carbon dioxide emissions, deforestation, smog, and oil spills. These developments indicate that technology and "right knowledge" will surmount the "gargantuan challenge." Against any doubts that technology can solve the problem that technology created—which he labels as the "tragic view"—he points out accelerating rates of decarbonization. But this argument reveals a further inconsistency in his thinking: strides toward decarbonization affirm progress, even though decarbonization is necessary because of the environmental regression caused by advances in science and technology.

Pinker's account is also marked by a one-dimensional view of religion, which he describes as the scourge of humankind, marked by superstition, bloodshed, ignorance, and belief "without good reason." One of the heroes of the book is William Foege, former chief of the CDC Smallpox Eradication Program. Foege saved 131 million lives through a pioneering inoculation program in Africa, and Pinker places him among the Enlightenment actors who advanced global health. Pinker does not mention, however, that Foege's work began in Nigeria while he was on a Lutheran medical mission. Pinker similarly warps the heroism of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. to fit his Enlightenment narrative: "Gandhi and King were right, but without data, you would never know it." He later conflates the Christian God with Santa Claus. The triviality of such claims undermines Pinker's representation of the

Enlightenment as the paragon of curiosity and sympathy.

Such unabashed trust in science leans toward absolutism, one that squashes dissent and prizes conformity of thought. Reason, Pinker thinks, “is nonnegotiable,” and opposing it “is, by definition, unreasonable.” And for the unpersuaded, Pinker remarks upon their impending death, which he calls “progress, funeral by funeral.”

The book has a few moments not so chillingly or narrowly rendered. Pinker gestures to the Enlightenment’s complexity: “expertise, brainpower, and conscious reasoning . . . can be weapons for ever-more-ingenious rationalization.” But such caveats are steamrolled by his confidence in the power of reason. As he notes, “one cannot reason that there’s no such thing as reason” and “the beauty of reason is that it can always be applied to understand failures of reason.” Those statements may be true. But one cannot use reason to expose the subjectivity of other ways of knowing the world without also discovering the subjectivity of reason. And one cannot reason away the evils of reason as a matter of self-correction. That is rationalization.

Enlightenment Now represents our polarized times. To Pinker, the achievements of the Enlightenment “put the lie to any moaning” that questions its advance of progress. If dissenters are liars and the world’s 5 billion religious believers are delusional, and if the study does not change their minds, Pinker’s book has enlightened us on little more than how truly divided we are. Softening those divisions will require atheists and theists, Democrats and Republicans, rich people and poor people, white people and people of color, men and women to emulate the leadership—not just the data—of figures like Gandhi, King, and Foege.