

Is the World Less Violent in Contemporary Times?

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ABSTRACT

If we take various time periods; millennium, century, decade and year, and find out the number of deaths (which is of course a tough job for the sake of accuracy) in these periods, we come to know that death casualties and murders etc have seen a marked decrease over the course of period down to our contemporary times. The death toll of both the World Wars and the military conflicts together with genocides etc are far lesser than compared with the statistics of few hundred to a thousand years ago. Man has become tolerant and compassion has been bequeathed in him due to genetic evolution. The fact that we mostly come across the news violence has increased in our times finds its roots in the cause that our sensitivity toward violence has actually skyrocketed. Media, human compassion and an exceedingly louder voice for human rights have made us loath the minutest incidence of violence with utmost outburst of anger and dislike. That's why we always think there is more violence in the world today than it is in actuality.

Keywords: *Compassion, Sensitivity, Sectarianism, Time, Tolerance, Violence, War*

Introduction

In the background of the atrocious and deadly events that took place during the two World Wars (especially the American nuclear bombing of Japan's twin cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima), the wars in Vietnam, Korea, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria etc together with the unswerving current wave of terrorism and extremism that has been rampant in various parts of the world for the last many years, we have often heard from our parents, elders and some so called intellectuals in our society that our ancestors (who lived hundreds and thousands of years ago) were non violent and that perhaps they lived in the most peaceful times in the history of mankind. And most of the times, we do believe them. Our blind belief in what they tell us perhaps stems from the very unfortunate fact of our habit of not asking questions, not reasoning and not asking them for scientific data and findings in order to have their point of view buttressed and believed in. This is sadly the dilemma of our society as a whole.

Steven Pinker nullifies such claims and terms them as baseless and contrary to what is on ground. He remarks "anyone who thinks that terrorism is a phenomenon of the new millennium has a short memory. The romantic political violence of the 1960s and 1970s comprised hundreds of bombings, hijackings, and shootings by various armies, coalitions, leagues, brigades, factions and fronts" (Pinker, 2011).

Steven Pinker, author of the "Better Angels of Our Nature; Why Violence Has Declined", is a professor in the department of psychology at Harvard University. He has courageously and with scientific and archaeological backing, debunked this

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old fashioned and misleading notion; that is pervasive in our modern society, that humans today are way more violent than their ancestors were and that the modern times are the most violent.

Steven Pinker acknowledges that by looking at the chaotic and conflagrating series of violent events in Darfur (Sudan) and Iraq (and not to mention Afghanistan and Syria); one is forced to think that the world will soon fall apart if human beings go on with this pace of unimaginably fatal violence. But at the same time, he rejects such a thought and says that “Our ancestors were perhaps more violent than we are today. Violence has been in decline over long stretches of time and perhaps we are living today in the most peaceful times in the history of our specie’s existence” (Pinker, 2011).

Steven Pinker believes, as mentioned above, that violence has significantly declined over large stretches of time; and can be noticed if we take scales at the levels of millennia, centuries, decades and years from now. He certainly has a number of explanations and scientific evidence to back up his statement above. He has compared the ancient societies of our ancestors (right from the stateless ones) to the modern societies in a number of ways. We will be looking deeper into these explanations put forward by Steven Pinker and will try to reach to a common logical ground of understanding the quantification of violence.

1) The Millennium Scale:

Until about ten thousand years ago, all human beings lived in stateless societies (ones without proper governmental apparatus and social organization). They lived as hunters and or gatherers; meaning they hunted for preys (games sometimes called) and gathered roots, seeds and others parts of plants as food for their survival and subsistence. Such a state in the life of humankind is often thought to be one of primordial harmony and peace and thus close to the concept of “natural world.”

But the archaeologist Laurens Carie, has looked and compared the casualty rates among the contemporary hunter and gatherer societies; which are indeed our best source of evidence, to the ancient hunter and gatherer societies which has pointed to a rather different conclusion (TED, 2007). He plots a graph which shows the percentage of casualties due to warfare among the males in a number of foraging or hunter and gatherer societies of the ancient times. The results he obtained were plausibly shocking. He found out that the chances a person would die at the hands of another person in the ancient foraging societies were 60 percent. It came down to 15 percents in the case of the Gabuski society and almost too few percent in the 20th century Europe and America which includes all the deaths of both World Wars. If the 60 percent death rates were persistent, then we would have 2 billion deaths in both the World Wars and other major conflicts (which would have dealt a catastrophic blow to the human species on earth) rather than a 100 million.

Also on the millennium scale, one can figure out the lifestyles of those early civilizations; to which the Bible has also pointed to. For example, at one place in the Holy Bible when God commanded Moses to exact vengeance on behalf of the Israelis against the Midianites.

“Did you keep all the women alive? Moses asked them (his army).

Look! These women (captured Midianites) were the same ones who were counseled by the Balaam to cause the Israelis to commit a grievous sin against the Lord at Peor. As a result, that plague infected the Lord's community. You are to kill every male child (along with an adult man of course) and every woman who has had sexual relations with a man. You are to allow the young women who have not yet had sexual relations with a man to live for yourselves" (Retrieved from <http://biblehub.com/isv/numbers/31.htm>). In other words, kill all the men and male children and keep the virgins alive for yourselves so that you can rape them.

Also in the ancient religious books, there is a long list of sadistic and cruel punishments ranging from capital punishment (including stoning to death of both man and woman for extra marital affairs) to amputating of limbs, blinding, chopping off of tongue, pulling apart by horses etc for crimes such as homosexuality, blasphemy, theft, sodomy etc. This is considered utterly insane and outrageous to the core especially in our contemporary times. This is equally frustratingly infuriating to observe that a large volume of our population still has inclinations to resorting to such inhumane acts of violence and that believes it is their divine right to punish other fellow human beings even in our contemporary world of today. It is beyond rationality and humanity that such violent appeals of certain religious sects still find an enticing audience mostly for the vested interests of few lunatics. It haunts us even today and has become the constitutions of some state actors (which has to determine the barbaric way and the date of our expiry for the actions we do as human beings that contradict its monstrous spirit).

Look at the cruel persecution of some religious minorities in Pakistan at the hands of a variety of lunatic and mindless faction of people who spread terror and violence. The State of Pakistan has implicitly kept mum over these heinous acts of wiping out of minorities off the face of the country. One's thinking capability and rationality get numbed at the height of lunacy that drove the State of Pakistan to constitutionally label and tag the "Ahmedis" as Non-Muslims and Ka'firs. It was perhaps the worst example of State legislation against any minority religious group in the world. And look at the juncture where liberal minds (westernized) and lunacy (religious bigotry) come into a perpetual state of physical contact. The so called "liberal mind" here of course was meant for the westernized Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, then Prime minister of the Islamic republic of Pakistan who actually allowed and led this despicable act of terming the Ahmedis as Ka'firs in the parliament; which had to be a place for law making for the relief of the common man but unfortunately it was used as a tool for the marginalization of minority groups and exacting vengeance.

Another such gruesome incidence that according to some writers unearthed the hypocritical face of some sections of the society and of some elements in the State of Pakistan when an elite police guard, Mumtaz Qadri, who in broad day light and in the presence of scores of other fellow policemen, killed his boss and governor of the Punjab province, Salman Taseer, is regarded and revered as a national hero just because he killed a man who (allegedly) committed blasphemy. Somewhat similar is the case of former federal minister for minority, Shahbaz Bhatti (Christian) who was gunned down in the country's capital of Islamabad just because he was not one amongst them (through religious point of view). In short, some sects in Pakistan are used to comfortably using religion for their perverted designs of punishing ones and rewarding others with no fears of accountability and justice.

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In addition to the above incidents which bares the malevolent face of our society, other similar shamefully inhumane acts were committed ostensibly in the name of religion such as burning alive of and axing to death of people (mostly mentally challenged) who are accused of blasphemy (or just to seek revenge in personal enmity) are unfortunately quite commonplace in Pakistan and other so called Muslim countries. This has to be stopped if earning a better name for Islam as a religion is the desired objective. State should have no role in the personal matters of its citizens.

The reason I discussed above the prevalence of such punishments in our modern societies is because of the very fact that I am trying to bring into the account of the reader's mind the basic drivers of such punishments that are undoubtedly anti-human and anachronistically loathsome and that are unfortunately pervasive in our so modern yet conservative states.

Anyways, we were talking about the frequency of the casualty rates among males due to warfare in the hunter and gatherer societies of the ancient times (millennia) which were very high as compared to such societies in our modern world, as revealed by the archaeological survey of Mr Carie.

2) The Century Scale:

During the Middle Ages (5th-15th century), in Europe, although there was a remarkable decrease in the frequency of casualty rates due to warfare (although we do not have statistical evidence for that but conventional history does back it up); yet, torture and mutilation among a number of sadistic punishments were common for minor non-violent crimes (misdemeanor) such as stealing a loaf of bread or talking against the king etc. Punishment was considered a favorite form of entertainment. Slavery and serfdom were the preferred forms of labor. People were born only to serve the mighty ones and no one could contain this viciously insane cycle.

Also, weird forms of rituals and were commonplace in Europe that took the lives of many as a result of violent and deadly punishments. For example, the psychology of witchcraft accusations can shade into other blood libels such as the recurring rumors in Medieval Europe that the Jews had poisoned the wells or killed Christian children during Passover to use their blood for Matzo (a dry, thin bread eaten especially by the Jews during Passover). What happens next is thousands of Jews get massacred in England, France, Germany and the Low Countries during the Middle Ages, emptying entire regions of their Jewish populations, (Pinker, 2011: 516). So this was the state of affairs in the Medieval Europe, but simultaneously one cannot deny the fact (as backed by both social scientists and conventional historians) that the graph of violence had somehow plummeted during this period of time as compared to thousands of years ago.

Now we will move on to our next level of scale representing an overall steep decline in the graph of violence.

3) The Decade Scale:

The decade scale too supports Steven Pinker's argument that violence has actually gone down over a course of many scores of decades (and centuries and millennia of course).

According to Non-governmental organizations' statistical data; there has been a steep decline in violence in America and Europe, (TED, 2007).

It has been observed that:

- Inter State wars have significantly declined
- Deadly ethnic riots or pogroms have plummeted
- And Military coups have largely gone down the graph

In that perspective, if we take the example of Turkey and Pakistan, where the military institutions have been very strong as compared to the civilian governments in both the countries, we come to the unambiguous conclusion that military interventions have tended to go down. In Turkey, the military has largely been sideline by and which works under the civilian government until recently when a half-hearted and poorly orchestrated military coup d'état was staged by a faction of the Turkish military to topple the Erdogan regime and to put in place a secular regime (the Ataturk model). However the coup was dead on arrival as hundreds of thousands of Erdogan supporters swarmed the streets of Turkey and denounced the coup. It was painful nonetheless to hear about the news that hundreds of anti-coup demonstrators were brutally killed during this ensuing chaos. At the end, the civilian government won the battle and the coup plotters were treated to horrible punishments as a wakeup call from the Erdogan regime to the black sheep inside Turkey's military institution.

Also, in the case of Pakistan, military coups, which have been a constant threat to democratically elected civilian governments, have now been warded off to a larger extent since the civilian government of PPP came to power in 2008. The memoirs of the public demands from the "Third Umpire" by both PTI and PAT leadership to topple the Nawaz government during the "Dharna days" are still fresh in our minds. However, the military ostensibly flatly rejected the temptation to answering such subversive calls and instead chose to be a neutral observer.

Thus it is a clear and welcoming indication coming from the "decade level analysis" that military coups are no longer a routine practice in such fragile states; in terms of democratic norms and values to say the least.

Also, graphical analysis indicates that in Europe and America, the number of deaths per conflict per year, from 1950 onward till 2005, have sharply declined from a whopping number of 65,000 in 1950s to less than 2,000 in 2005 (TED, 2007).

4) The Year Scale:

The year scale shows a very similar trend in regard to a drop down in violent across the world. For example, since the end of the Cold War, there has/have been:

- a) Fewer civil wars
- b) A drastic decline in genocides (almost 90 percents) (TED, 2007)
- c) A significant reversal of the 1960s up stick in homicide, violent crime etc

All the aforementioned four scales (millennium, century, decade and year) statistically and rationally justify Steven Pinker's take on violence which he says

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has factually declined and I fully agree with his stance on that in the view of all the brilliant examples he has put forward in defense of his argument.

Perhaps part of the reason, we are forced to think that our contemporary times are way more violent than the ancient ones, may be due to the reason that the more often we come across gory images (and news) in newspapers and on TV, it becomes easier for us to recall them again and again and that is how we probably forget about what happened decades, centuries and millennia and years ago but rather focus on what is happening around us most recently. It is something perhaps related to cognitive psychology.

Why has violence declined?

Now we will move to the second most important part of this paper, which will be focusing on the possible factors that might have actually led to this steep decline in violence over the vast stretches of time and that may be the reason we are living today in relatively lesser violent times in the history of our specie.

There are four such possible explanations for the decline of violence, given by Steven Pinker:

1) Thomas Hobbes Philosophy:

Thomas Hobbes probably got it right when he said “life in a state of nature is nasty, short, brutish, solitary and poor” (Gibbons, 2000). It is however not to say, according to Hobbes, that humans have a primordial thirst for blood shedding but because of the logic to anarchy. Take the example of fragile states (economically and militarily both) that have a weak writ of state in most of its geography. Such states are quickly devoured by non-state actors in the form of violent jihadists and insurgents. It therefore rightly calls for the need for the presence of a powerful state apparatus in order to contain the vicious desires of such extremist and terrorist outfits in order to preserve the freedom and liberty of rest of the populace.

Many people including rival scholars got furious at Hobbes for his pro-monarch stance and anti-mass disdain. They considered him no more than a stooge of the ruling monarchic elite. But Hobbes had a convincing logic behind his statement above.

Hobbes statement on the nature of human can be interpreted in this way that in a state of anarchy (nature), there is a constant temptation of killing and invading your neighbors in a preemptive (tactical) maneuver before they could do the same to you. It means, humans did not have an instinctual thirst for blood, but for their own survival in a state of nature. They had to kill others in order to live themselves safely (survival of the fittest). This thought prevailed especially among the hunters and gatherers.

Now how to deal with such a dilemma? There is this concept of “deterrence” put forward by defense and socio-political experts. It means that “you don’t have to necessarily invade or kill your enemy but rather announce publicly that you have the capacity of retaliation to any sort of attacks or aggression” and perhaps that is a doctrine that can significantly help you ward off your enemies. Having said so, there is also a dark side to it. Sometimes, your enemy might simply just bluff about having such deterrence. It might give you quite a tough time to analyze and respond to such situations. It is a great risk indeed. I mean you do want (in some

cases perhaps) to invade and kill your enemy while keeping yourself relatively safer, but that cannot be the case if your enemy (really) has the deterrence that can debilitate you back. So, the concept of deterrence is still useful (but elusive) and that it is mostly theoretical rather than pragmatic because of the sheer level of unpredictability engrained in its very essence.

Now Thomas Hobbes has an alternative for it. He says if the State (or any other democratic authority) has a legitimate use of force (violence); then such an authority (implicitly referring to State) can:

- a) Reduce the temptation to killing others preemptively due to the fear of a reciprocal punishment by an ultimate authority (State).
- b) Lessen the temptation of invading your enemies preemptively (like in the hunter and gatherer societies) given its prospects of futility as the State will confiscate all the captured property back and will punish for a lesson.
- c) Reduce a knee jerk approach to bloody vengeance in the presence of a supreme authority (State).

Thus, it will lead us to a peaceful coexistence rather than a chaotic one. And this is the main reason that Thomas Hobbes supports a powerful central authority having the legitimacy to having a monopoly on violence. Many people unfortunately regard him as “pessimistic” and “fascist” but Steven Pinker’s approach has probably wiped off such thoughts from our minds. Even sociological and archaeological surveys reveal that the decline of homicide (violence) actually coincided with the rise of centralized States in Europe. Also, If we compare strong centralized states to failing/failed states (like Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Yemen, Nigeria, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan etc), we get to know the fact that violence has actually erupted heavily in the latter regions (often called fragile states).

2) Life is cheap:

At most places in the ancient times, people were of the view that life is cheap. It was due in part to diseases and sufferings which were commonplace and in part to death which was mostly premature; one had very few compunctions of inflicting sufferings on others.

However, with the advancement in science and technology and economic growth in our contemporary world, life expectancy has skyrocketed and become more pleasant (by the addition of at least 10 to 20 years or more to the average life) and that one now puts a high value on life than before. Therefore, we have come to a common ground of realization that life is precious and must be regarded and protected. These arguments were actually put forward by the political scientist James Paine.

3) Nonzero-Sum games (Robert Wright):

Robert Wright is a seasoned journalist and scholar who believes that in certain situations, non-violence or cooperation can benefit both partners. To support his argument, he comes up with the examples of two parties that by means of cooperation can earn:

- Gains in trade and businesses

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- Truce and subsequent peace and harmony; by laying off their arms
- Peace due to “economic integration” among the world’s heavyweights;

In order to support the above statements and possibilities one needs not to go too far to bring example but merely to ponder on the fact that any head-on collision between such partners who have invested so much in the development of their countries would always avoid going to war as it would wreak havoc not just on the economy but also on the citizens of both the partner countries.

The following are additional best examples of the above assumptions (although they are rival but still hold on to the idea of economic integration):

China & the United States bilateral trade volume (2012) = \$579 billions (U.S., C.T.F. n.d.).

China & Japan bilateral trade volume (2014) = \$340 billion (Drysedale, 2015).

China & India bilateral trade volume (2014) = \$70.25 billions (Economic. n.d.).

It is pertinent to mention here that the pace of economic integration has increased multiple folds by the rapid advancement in science and technology which has in the contemporary world made it possible to trade (thus increasing the number of positive sum games) over vast distances and among larger groups of people anywhere in the world. As a result of all these positive developments, the value of human life has increased and violence has declined.

Let us assume if China did not trade at all with any of the above mentioned global partners, in which case, I believe, the prospects of going to war and consequently wiping out humanity off the face of the planet would be far more than with economic integration in place at the moment. All the above statistical data corroborates the prevalence of peace and non-violence in the modern and post-modern world, thus confirming the arguments of Robert Wrights and subsequently of Dr Pinker.

4) Peter Singer’s philosophy:

In his book titled “The expanding circle”, Peter Singer argues that “evolution bequeaths humans with a sense of empathy”.

Empathy means “the experience of understanding another person’s condition from their perspective”. You place yourself in their shoes and feel what they are feeling (empathy, n.d.).

But there is an unfortunate side of being empathetic. That is, empathetic to whom? Sadly, the ones to whom one can be empathetic are the ones in our close circle of family and friends and it is by default. People generally out of these circles are considered as sub-humans and there is less likelihood of becoming empathetic towards them.

Fortunately, over history, this close circle of friends and family has significantly expanded which can be witnessed through a number of historical findings. For example, this circle has expanded from family to village, to clan, tribe, nation, other races, both sexes, and perhaps to other species. An excellent example of the circle’s expansions to other species can be the humans’ increasing love and

empathy for species such as dogs and cats in the Western world. Cruelty to animals in many of those nations is punishable by the law of the land.

Recently, a woman in Florida duct taped her dog's muzzle when it was not stopping barking, took its picture and then posted it to her Facebook Timeline under the caption "this is what happens when you don't shut up". The news went viral on Facebook and other social media outlets with the same heading "This is what happens when you don't shut up"(Blakeley, 2015, November 28), and within a couple of days (not even weeks), the woman was arrested by the police for being cruel to her dog (the other specie). So, I mean to say that the laws in those countries have bequeathed empathy in humans (through the agency of time) even towards dogs unlike in our relatively lawless and so religious societies where there is no protection even for human life let alone a dog's even in today's contemporary world.

Now come to the possible reasons and causes behind this expanding circle. Perhaps, the following factors were pivotal in this expansion;

- a) Increasing the circles of reciprocity
- b) The logic of the golden rule:

The more you think about and interact with other people, the more you realize that it is untenable to privilege your interests over theirs. At least not if you want to listen to them, you can not say that your interests are special to theirs:

- c) Cosmopolitanism
- d) History
- e) Journalism
- f) Memoirs
- g) Realistic fiction
- h) Travels

All these agencies prompt you to be more empathetic by learning from the past experiences of others who treated themselves special over others. It is thus one can better understand how one can fit oneself in the shoes of the other who was treated as a sub-human.

Whatever is causing this decline in violence has profound implications which should force us to ask not just why there is war but why is there peace. Not just what are we doing wrong, but what if we have been doing right? Because we have been doing something right and that is the reason we are living in a far more relatively less violent times in the history of our specie's existence.

Conclusion

Dr Steven Pinker's research work is a hard slap in the face of those pseudo-intellectuals, so-called religious and political scholars and leaders, and academicians who often appear on the national televisions and constantly warn us of the hazards of the exploding developments in science and technology and economics (mind you, in the contemporary world) and preach us to go back to the

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stone age in order to achieve eternal peace and mental tranquility by sticking to the outdated and anachronistic traditions and practices that our forefathers have purportedly been doing in the past.

These people are simply no more than charlatans who are not qualified even to sit together with and debate with an average educated person let alone for example debating with world famed researchers and academicians like Dr Steven Pinker and or Dr Stephen Hawking. They lack empathy towards others (hence an increase in violence among their circles). Unfortunately, in our contemporary but conservative societies, such pseudo-intellectuals are revered and honored just because of their stupid and easily bought half cooked truths which are creating a panic among the common masses. They must be educated with the findings of Dr Pinker's magnificent research or be put under government accountability and scrutiny for creating a psychological terror among the masses. And why should such charlatans be allowed to sit on national and international TVs as analysts in the first place? The bottom-line is that we should be jubilant about being lucky enough to be living in a peaceful world today. By saying so I am not at all trying to turn a blind eye to some of the most gruesome and grotesque terror acts happening in different parts of the world today which are resulting in the loss of precious human lives. I am only contending in light of Dr Pinker's research that our past was bloodier than our present. Yes we are living in a less violent world today.

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