

## STATES OF MATTER

# A touch of 'Enlightenment'

At a time when most pundits are given to despair over the near-collapse of global order, psychologist and linguist Steven Pinker sees immense scope for human betterment



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**Sunny side up** Pinker's thesis is very simple: the current times look bleak only because we have brief memories  
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A voice of hope is always welcome in times of turmoil. Steven Pinker, the Harvard University psychologist and linguist has a new book out titled *Enlightenment Now*, embellishing an already established reputation as the world's optimist in chief. Since at least 2011, when he published *The Better Angels of Our Nature* — a work that takes its title from a deeply evocative speech of Abraham Lincoln's — Pinker has been identified with a sunny view of today's possibilities of progress. At a time when most pundits are giving in to hand-wringing despair over a collapsing global order, Pinker sees enormous possibilities of human betterment in the growing influence of the values of the "Enlightenment".

Pinker's thesis is simple: the current times look bleak only because we have brief memories. We have gone through worse times and the trajectory of the global community is towards greater reason and progress. Human altruism, an integral part of the Enlightenment doctrine, continues to be a powerful force for the good.

Pinker's sunny conclusions have been contested on empirical grounds. Cataclysmic world events are like "black swans": everybody is convinced that they do not exist until they wade into the field of human experience. Nobody quite foresaw when war broke out in Europe in 1914, that it would last quite as long as it did, and would leave a sediment of bitter-

ness that would only be dispelled by another epic bloodletting.

A text that Pinker quotes with the utmost reverence is the answer that Immanuel Kant published to the question "What is Enlightenment?" in 1784. But if that were to be taken as the definitive statement of doctrine, it has taken a rather long time for humanity to learn how to exercise its natural inclination towards "free thought". Kant believed that this proclivity exists as a germ in every human being, which "gradually acts upon the mind of the people", transforming them into agents "capable of acting in freedom". Eventually, when the government gains Enlightenment, it begins to treat man, "who is now more than a machine, according to his dignity".

Well over a century since Kant wrote those lines, governments in Europe were inducting citizens as cogs in the massive killing machines they assembled for industrial-scale warfare. That is really not a serious difficulty for Pinker. Warfare on an industrial scale may have been an unfortunate application of Enlightenment science, but reason has since achieved greater levels of diffusion. Though European in origin — and enshrined for the first time in the American declaration of independence — reason and science are universal values, progressively bringing greater

masses under their benign sway.

The American declaration of independence is an apt metaphor for what went wrong in the Enlightenment project. Agreeing on its resonant formulation that all men are "created equal" and endowed with "certain inalienable rights", was the easy part. The waffling began the moment it came to making this principle operational in the citizenship law. The US "naturalisation" law adopted in 1790 — a mere 14 years since the declaration of independence — restricted the right of citizenship to "free white persons" of good character.

This was foretold in the doctrine pronounced by Kant and its curious insistence that Enlightenment lies in the "free" submission of all to universal laws, leading to the civic state in which every man would be equal and autonomous and "compelled to be a good citizen". Kant begins with a notion of "free" submission of all mankind to the universal laws — whatever be his moral attributes — and ends with a certain force of "compulsion" that makes him a good citizen. That force of compulsion would be subtle in some instances, overt and explicit in others.

Kant for instance, saw private individuals as meriting the status of citizenship only if they were free, ie, unconstrained by the need to dispose of their labour power in the market to keep body and soul together. He was convinced moreover, that children and women did not possess the "requisite quality" for citizenship, a doctrinal blindness that fatally damages his notions of freedom and equality.

If Enlightenment was about man escaping from tutelage and assuming his inalienable right of "free thought", there were some among the species more fitted to remain in thrall to those of greater wisdom. That was the ambiguity that allowed Enlightenment doctrine to seamlessly segue into an ideology of slavery, racism and ultimately, colonial conquest and subjugation of "lesser people".

In the breathless ardour of his advocacy, Pinker does not pause to consider these troubling ambivalences. He turns his fury on those he sees contesting the possibilities of irreversible human progress merely through the rote repetition of centuries-old formulations. And he glosses over the restoration of a deeply in-

egalitarian discourse in the liberal democracies of the West, such as the easy acceptance in the current US administration, of the 1790 principle of the "free white person" being uniquely suited for the rights of citizenship.

After two global holocausts in the 20th century, the Enlightenment that Pinker champions gained a new lease of life in the US, though without quite ironing out its inner contradictions. The US today seems on the pathway towards acting out those contradictions with a renewed venom, promising not a new dawn of "reason, science, humanism and progress", but their negation.

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