

The case of the 'Brutal Savage': Poirot or Clouseau?

Why Steven Pinker, like Jared Diamond, is wrong

by Stephen Corry

Steven Pinker claims to prove scientifically: that the world is now more peaceful; that people were morally retarded and less intelligent until very recently; and that most tribal peoples live in a state of chronic war ended only by state intervention. Corry shows that Pinker has many facts wrong, misrepresents others, and omits evidence that contradicts his thesis. Corry demonstrates that a single – highly controversial – anthropologist provides half the data Pinker uses to characterise all the settled tribes in the world (outside New Guinea). Pinker thinks his critics are lost in a Noble Savage myth. Corry replies that Pinker is promoting a fictitious, colonialist image of a backward 'Brutal Savage' (Corry's phrase, not Pinker's), which pushes the debate back over a century and is still used to destroy tribes.

Perhaps I owe Jared Diamond an apology. I recently attacked his view that most tribal peoples live in a state of constant warfare, that is until the cavalry storms in, pennants proclaiming 'peace to all men'. This old colonial idea was first popularly resurrected by Steven Pinker, not Diamond, so it's time to peruse the former's mighty book, 'The Better Angels of Our Nature'.

Both Pinker and Diamond rely for their 'Brutal Savage' myth largely on numbers reported by Lawrence Keeley,¹ who in turn refers to only a tiny handful of original sources. I'll come back to this paucity of 'data' later.

I battled my way through 'Better Angels', encountering several old friends who had been hauled into the dock to face Judge Pinker. By the end, I was worn down by the faulty facts and attempts to lead the reader – we, the jury who must eventually deliver a verdict about all this – astray. Almost wherever one probes Pinker's facts, they crumble.

Consider, for example, his assertion, 'There is no indication that anyone

but Hitler and a few fanatical henchmen thought it was a good idea for the Jews to be exterminated.' The plan may well have been initially driven by a handful, but once public rumors began spreading, there was little dissent. Recent research has found 42,500 institutions set up to perpetrate the Holocaust (more than double the number previously known). According to Geoffrey Megargee, 'Many more people knew about it and took part in it... it was central to the entire Nazi system... many other countries had their own camp systems.'² I doubt many serious historians would accept Pinker's description as uncontentious.

Or, look at how Pinker approaches the An Lushan revolt in eighth century China. He calls it, '*the worst atrocity of all time... that, according to censuses, resulted in the loss of..., a sixth of the world's population.'* That's 36 million people, an estimate which has been cut to about one-third by Matthew White, whom Pinker cites frequently.³ Pinker has a footnote admitting that the numbers are '*controversial*', and goes on to say

that the figures *'cannot all be taken at face value.'* You can say that again, but it hasn't stopped him from gleefully and unequivocally declaring it the world's worst atrocity (which it isn't, according to White's latest guess).

Let's start at the beginning for a perfect example of how Pinker leads us on. He takes only a single page of preamble before he lays out his grisly market stall to try and sell us his grislier thesis, which as far as I can understand it, is basically that everyone was once generally violent and horrible (tribal people still are, apparently they are living relics of the past). Darwinian selection favored those who were the most aggressive towards outsiders, and nicest to insiders. They had lots of children who went on to create states, which were generally nice, and imposed peace and 'prosperity'.⁴ Peoples unfortunate enough to live without the 'state' are prey to biology and 'nature'; those lucky enough to have one are enlightened by its wonderful 'culture'.

Before coming to all that, we must first stagger through a charnel house where the evidence on display is five discoveries of prehistoric bodies, all victims of violent and deliberate killing – or that's what the author needs us to think. He joshingly asks, *'What is it about the ancients that they couldn't leave us an interesting corpse without resorting to foul play?'* Let's look at this, his first submission to the reader, in some detail.

Exhibit number one, our introduction to the idea that everyone was once more murderous than we are now, is the 5,200 year-old 'Iceman', nicknamed 'Ötzi' after

the Alpine area where his corpse was discovered in 1991.

Scientists have figured out a lot about the Iceman: they know how old he was, the season he died, where he grew up, what he had for lunch, and much else. Pinker introduces Ötzi, in his opening paragraph, with an account of his kit: *'ax and backpack, a quiver of fletched arrows, a wood-handled dagger...'* until we get to *'snowshoes made from leather'*. In the second paragraph, the author breathes with Hitchcockian crescendo, *'He had not fallen in a crevasse and frozen to death, as scientists had originally surmised; he had been murdered.'* Here then is Pinker's very first 'Murder Most Foul'.

It all seems straightforward, but let's cross-examine the evidence, keep an open mind, and stop constructing theories around desired conclusions. The Iceman has been studied by a large number of scientists, and I don't know who are supposed to have deduced that he had met his end in a crevasse. Ötzi was found in a rock gully practically at the top of a mountain ridge – not in the moving body of a glacier where crevasses form.⁵ Had he really plummeted into a crevasse, he would neither have remained in one place, nor in one piece. Body parts from glaciers were on display in the Alps until recently, and they were invariably in bits, torn apart by the force of the flowing ice.

It's true that the couple who found the body initially assumed it was a recent mountain accident, but for the story about real scientific first impressions, why not turn to the first scientist actually on the scene. He was forensic doctor, Rainer Henn, who supervised the body's removal

from the gulley just four days after its discovery. He noticed straight away that it did *not* resemble a glacier accident: there was none of the so-called 'grave wax', or adipocere, which usually forms in such a corpse.⁶ All things considered, the chances of this involving any crevasse were virtually nil.

So if Ötzi was not a victim of the glacier, had he been murdered? After all, that's the only reason he is resurrected to introduce Pinker's case. Scientists have come up with numerous guesses about how he met his end, almost as many as those who have thought about it, but Pinker offers us just one '*reconstruction*': he thinks Ötzi, '*belonged to a raiding party that clashed with a neighboring tribe.*'⁷

Let's consider this. The Iceman had three significant wounds: a cut hand; an arrowhead in his back; and a blow to his head. Both arrow and head wound may have proved fatal, though not necessarily immediately. It was a violent death, but could it have been a result of a clash between tribes?

We'll don our Sherlock Holmes 'deerstalker' hat in a moment to consider the evidence. But first let's scrutinize Pinker's list of Ötzi's possessions, for it is largely from these that the accusation is construed.

Firstly, Pinker is wrong about the footwear: Ötzi did not have '*snowshoes made from leather*'. He had ordinary and very serviceable boots, but it's not a material point.⁸

No, I'm afraid if Ötzi really was looking for a fight, he must join those scientists at the bottom of the class: he was more Marx Brother than

Navy SEAL. The flint blade of his dagger was tiny, a mere 1.65 inches, about one-third the length of a table knife and much shorter than a pocketknife. It would have been great for skinning game and working wood and leather, but feeble as a weapon. If it hadn't been found with its handle, it could have been mistaken for an arrowhead.

Pinker tells us that Ötzi had a bow, but omits to mention that it wouldn't work: it was unfinished and not even notched to take a string. The quiver did *not* hold fletched arrows, Pinker is wrong about that too: there were twelve unfinished, and useless, arrow shafts, lacking both feathers and arrowheads. Only two others were finished (though broken), fletched arrows.

In other words, the Iceman had taken no trouble at all to ready his weapons for his supposed 'raiding party'. Or, did he intend to tear his enemies apart with bare hands and teeth (which might at least fit with notions about the brutality of our forebears)? Pinker is fond of statistics so here's one: 100% of Ötzi's weapons were duds.

The 'raiding party' reconstruction doesn't stand up, so let's posit an alternative fantasy. Suppose Ötzi was in the gulley resting after his ascent. Now comes a young, inexperienced, and not overly bright, hunter, climbing the pass from the Italian side. He thinks he's alone with the mountain and is looking for movement which would reveal a stately ibex, shy chamois, or at least a marmot creeping out from winter sleep – all game animals which are well disguised against the boulders and scree.

The guy spies what he thinks is prey, moving amongst the rocks. (Ötzi was clothed head-to-toe in furs.) Too bowstring-happy, he lets fly with an arrow from a hundred feet below the gully, slamming into poor Ötzi's shoulder. (The angle and depth of wound fits my scenario.) Ötzi flails in agony, inadvertently smashing his head on a rock but succeeding in pulling out the arrowshaft. The hunter flees, hoping there are no witnesses, and abandoning Ötzi to be covered in snow, which packed into ice that kept him in storage for millennia. It may have been a hunting accident – not foul play at all.⁹ If detectives were called to a contemporary scene, a body shot in the back in such circumstances, would they ejaculate, 'Murder!' with such alacrity? Surely not if they were Poirot rather than Clouseau. If Pinker were there, wouldn't he be the first to reach for the statistics?

He might for example compare the number of hunters murdered, to those killed accidentally while hunting. Seven hundred thousand Italians have hunting licenses and if we know the total number of murders in Italy, which we do, we can see that one hunter is murdered on average every couple of months. Compare that to the fact that in October 2012, the month after the hunting season started, no less than thirteen hunters had already died in shooting accidents. The ratio of murders to fatal accidents for Italian hunters today turns out to be about 1:26. In other words, it is twenty-six times more likely for a hunter to die in a hunting accident than to be murdered, at least at the start of the season. Over twice as many again survive accidental wounding.

Bearing in mind that Ötzi was *not* equipped for a raid, that today's hunters have had several millennia to improve their safety record, that (knowing how trigger-happy their compatriots are) modern hunters don't disguise themselves in animal furs, is it not far more likely that this was a case of accidental death, not murder?¹⁰

I stress that I am not putting this forward as a theory: my proposition is facetious, though my facts aren't. I have no idea how Ötzi died, and nor does Pinker. My point is simply that the chances of him being in a 'raiding party' are close to zero: after all, he was carrying not one serviceable weapon.

That's not to say that future developments in this enduring case might not bring such a scenario back into the courtroom, who knows? But it wouldn't alter my point: the current evidence is simply not as Pinker presents it. He selects, bends and omits; we, the jury, are continually led astray. Pinker claims his methods are scientific but also admits that his first chapters are '*impressionistic*' – a case of having cake and eating it too?

Don't get me wrong: I'm not saying that prehistoric peoples were necessarily more peaceful than we are – though there are certainly specialists who think the evidence points that way.¹¹ Common sense would seem to back them up: when only a few hundred thousand individuals occupied an entire continent, and when game was plentiful, and possessions few and easily remade, why go looking for conflict?

Any guess – for it is nothing more than that – that fights were extremely common, and principally over women, might reveal more about those who promulgate it, than about our forebears. After all, there certainly is plenty of evidence (such as Stonehenge) of prehistoric peoples cooperating over long distances, and getting on famously with one another.

I am far from the first to question Pinker's conclusions.¹² His data is not irrefutable, as is sometimes claimed, and with even my own limited knowledge I can spot plenty in just the first pages which is plain wrong.

Having given us his version of Ötzi, Pinker goes on to cite other examples of the 'foul play' of the ancients. He presents us with 'Kennewick Man', 'Lindow Man', a decapitated skull from North England, and four family members from an ancient grave in Germany. About the latter, he decides that a couple and their two children buried together indicate another 'raid'.¹³

'Lindow Man' is one of several hundred 'bog bodies' preserved in peat in northern Europe, many dating from around two or three thousand years ago. A lot, including his, do show signs of what might be ritual killing – but others don't. One theory suggests that the bogs may have been chosen for human sacrifice or executions, or that particular people killed elsewhere were then carried to the marshes and left. If so, it wouldn't be surprising for them to show signs of violent death, in the same way that a cemetery for executed criminals would. The bogs were frankly unlikely sites for 'war' or raiding,

and the fact that bodies are usually found alone doesn't help any theory that they were war victims.

Instead of Lindow Man, why not cross-examine the oldest bog body so far found, the ten thousand-year-old 'Koelbjerg Woman' from Denmark? This poor soul was in her twenties when she met her end; her remains show no sign of foul play.

Or, what about one of the most interesting corpses ever unearthed, the spectacular 3,300 year-old Tutankhamun? The 'boy king' was just nineteen when he died; the latest research is unequivocal: there's no sign of murder.

Or, consider western Europe's oldest known deliberate burial indicating some ceremony, the twenty-nine thousand year-old so-called 'Red Lady of Paviland', from Wales. She was in fact a 'he', and displays nothing to indicate foul play.

And so on... I am not claiming that none of these people were deliberately killed; every one might have been, it's just that there's no evidence they were.

Pinker picks his victims with hindsight, but we can now pass a ruling on his supposed rhetorical submission, *'What is it about the ancients that they couldn't leave us an interesting corpse without resorting to foul play?'* The verdict is simple: they could and did.

There are many other examples of tendentiousness in Pinker's endless depiction of the violent past. For example, he says dueling *'sucked in such luminaries as Voltaire, Napoleon, the Duke of Wellington, Robert Peel, Tolstoy, Pushkin, and... Évariste Galois, the last two fatally.'*

If we are supposed to think *'sucked in'* means that such luminaries actually fought duels, we'd be entirely mistaken. The last two mentioned indeed died in duels, but of the first five, only one, Tolstoy, actually shot anyone dueling.¹⁴ Of the seven *'sucked in'*, less than half were involved in fatal duels. Why doesn't the author tell us he found only three well(ish)-known people seriously involved in duels, or why not leave the whole thing out? The real facts don't support his case; perhaps the idea is to batter us with so many spurious ones, that we'll succumb under the rain of blows.

Turning to a rather bigger issue, Pinker rightly says that since 1945, *'zero is the number of times that nuclear weapons have been used in conflict.'* He notes that, *'fallout from atmospheric tests can cause chromosome damage and cancer'*, but fails to mention the enforced removals of people from their lands to make way for weapons' tests, which destroyed uncounted lives in (at least) Australia, China, the United States, and the former USSR. The peoples of several Pacific islands remain amongst the worst affected, and not just with high rates of cancer and birth defects: some of these islands are so contaminated that the inhabitants have been forced out, perhaps forever. Such 'collateral damage' is rendered invisible in Pinker's 'datasets'. Why? Many war deaths are not the result of direct killing, but arise from starvation or disease (including in concentration camps), so why not grant that nuclear weapons have killed many people since 1945? In addition, nearly five hundred tons of 'depleted uranium' weapons, made of nuclear material, have been fired in war by

the United States and its allies. No one knows how many thousands of people in the Balkans and Middle East have been killed by them, or subsequently suffered from the radioactivity.¹⁵

Pinker's baldly stated facts shake and buckle under cross-examination, but when his opinion unabashedly shines through, it's easy to see where he's coming from. His third chapter, for example, may be largely about long-dead Europeans and so avoid any charges of racism or libel; pure prejudice on the other hand runs amok.

The section begins with a look at the statistics of 'declining' homicide rates in Europe (which his graphs actually show as recently increasing) and then degenerates further into a 'Tales from the Crypt' or 'Horrible-Histories' version of 'medievals' whom Pinker condemns as *'childish', 'gross', 'boorish', 'animalistic', and 'immature', lacking all 'refinement, self-control, and consideration'*.

This of course is the time of the extraordinarily original European cathedrals, still soaring over the continent's greatest cities after nearly a thousand years. They are accorded such esteem that after a few were blasted to smithereens in Europe's modern wars, they were painstakingly reconstructed stone after hewed stone at vast (largely American) expense. They are unlikely to be dropped from the list of the world's greatest buildings anytime soon.

Sticking to a European perspective, this is also the age when Cimabue and his (probable) pupil Giotto were laying the foundations for the Renaissance – which still forms the

basis of our vision of art; when Dante and Chaucer were at the forefront of written poetry and literature – key in their respective languages up to the present; and when Francis of Assisi and Hildegard of Bingen promulgated revolutionary ideas about humanity – which still underpin many current attitudes. Medieval priest Thomas Aquinas also deserves a mention: he has, after all, been called ‘one of (the) originators’ of the ‘foundation from which the sciences grew’.¹⁶

These of course are only a handful of those whose names are known.¹⁷ They and other exceptional individuals weren’t isolated from society. Lots of ordinary people were deeply moved by what they said and did, just as many are today. Medieval ideas of collective responsibility, charitable works, the importance of self-examination, and striving to lead a good and just life, were widespread, and ensured that many people spent a good deal of time actively helping others.

Pinker illustrates the age by coarsely dwelling on a c. 1480 German manuscript which he calls, ‘*a depiction of daily life as seen through the eyes of a knight*’. He reproduces two drawings of people behaving grossly, entitled ‘*Saturn*’ and ‘*Mars*’. What he doesn’t tell us is that they are intended to show the effects engendered by those planets, not ‘*daily life*’. Nor does he let us know that other drawings in the same book show people behaving with exemplary decorum, bathing, conversing, listening to music, and so on. He completely ignores the countless artworks of the same period showing people going about their lives perfectly politely (and busily undermining his theory).

‘Medievals’ don’t deserve to be cast aside with such scorn. Perhaps Pinker’s judgment that Europeans ‘*were, in a word, gross*’, just fails to appreciate beauty beyond the brutish.

He believes that industrialized people today are better than anyone else, and makes the astonishing claim, ‘*It was not just mundane physical comforts that our recent ancestors did without. It was also the higher and nobler things in life, such as knowledge, beauty, and human connection.*’ This will be surprising news to most tourists in Lascaux, Florence or Athens, or to readers of ‘*Gilgamesh*’, one of the earliest stories found; after three or four thousand years it can still move us with its aching tragedy about ‘*human connection*’.

Perhaps Pinker is simply being provocative for dramatic effect, perhaps all this is not intended to be taken seriously – is it ‘*comical historical*’ rather than ‘*tragical*’?

What is certainly tragic is Pinker’s sneering description of ‘*20th-century third-world liberation movements*’ being ‘*animated*’ by ‘*the usual goulash of nationalism, romantic militarism, Marxism-Leninism, and anti-imperialism.*’ That would certainly characterize much of the opposition to the Guatemalan dictatorship, a government guilty of the most widespread abuses vested on (primarily) indigenous people in recent years. Despite being the bloodiest conflict waged on the American continent in the last fifty years, leaving at least two hundred thousand dead, Pinker doesn’t mention it, except as an item in a list.¹⁸

The same *'goulash'* also applied to many in the French Resistance. *Maquisards* might not appreciate hearing that their comrades were tortured and died for what is contemptuously dismissed as meat stew. Americans who fought in the Spanish Civil War might concur. The scars of the latter conflict run very deep and, for many, still divide Spain. About half a million died. Pinker doesn't mention it at all.

But all this is still a digression from my main point: what's the 'evidence' concerning the violence of both our ancestors and tribal peoples today? Pinker lays this out in what I call his 'sawtooth' graph. It compares the percentage of *'deaths in warfare'* in a miniscule selection of four human *'categories'*: *'prehistoric archaeological sites'*; *'hunter-gatherers'*; what he calls *'hunter-horticulturalists & other tribal groups'*; and, finally, *'states'*.

The ones with the highest deaths in each category are at the top, which produces the 'sawtooth' shape, a series of diminishing triangles one on top of the other. The ordering of the data follows no pattern of time or place; the categorizations are also spurious. For example, the Ayoreo in Paraguay appear under *'hunter-gatherers'*, whereas the Waorani in Ecuador are under *'hunter-horticulturalists & other tribal groups'*. In reality, the two tribes do not live especially differently: both hunt, both grow crops, both build houses (not just shelters). The idea that this graph is a 'scientific' representation of anything is just nonsense.

The percentages of war deaths for states are, in Pinker's view, so small as to be practically invisible. I have

looked at the dark smoke and mirrors used to reduce what are in fact huge numbers to Pinker's tiny ones in my criticism of Jared Diamond's book,¹⁹ so I won't go into that again (save to note in passing, but with dismay, the twenty-two American veterans who kill themselves daily, and who are also invisible in both authors' data – more 'collateral damage').

Leaving aside (for reasons of space!) those he categorizes as *'hunter-gathers'*, the thousands of remaining tribal peoples in the world are represented by just ten; half of those are from New Guinea.²⁰ There are about a thousand languages in New Guinea, so if we equate these roughly to 'peoples', then Pinker's 'sample' amounts to just half of one percent of the 'tribes' on the island. These are not selected randomly, but are just those few societies where researchers have collected information on causes of death. (As I also point out elsewhere, few scholars looking for data on killing are likely to study peaceful societies, and almost none are cited.)²¹

One of the New Guinea tribes listed is the Dani of West Papua, an area invaded and brutally suppressed by Indonesia since the 1960s. As spokesman, Markus Haluk, retorted (over Jared Diamond's book), "The total of Dani victims from the Indonesian atrocities... is far greater than those from tribal war."²² Why aren't those deaths in Pinker's graph?

It is simply not scientific to generalize about a thousand New Guinea tribes on information from just five. Let's focus instead on who's left.

As always nowadays, whenever the 'Brutal Savage' myth is invoked, Napoleon Chagnon's 'sweaty, hideous'²³ Yanomami is guaranteed to career (I use the word advisedly) cinematically into sight, screaming blood-curdling growls and wails, and oozing green snot and red blood.²⁴ Although familiar to American college students, virtually every other scholar who has lived with the tribe considers Chagnon's characterization to be fictional.²⁵

Four of the five cited non-New Guinea societies are from the Amazon, and two of those are, as always, Yanomami.²⁶ Looked at another way, no less than twenty percent of the data Pinker uses to categorize the violence of the entire planet's tribal peoples (excluding 'hunter-gatherers') is derived from a single anthropologist, Napoleon Chagnon – whose data has been severely criticized for decades.²⁷ To put this yet another way, nearly *half* of all the thousands of the world's tribal peoples *outside* New Guinea (again excluding those Pinker has decided are '*hunter-gatherers*') are condemned as 'Brutal Savages' on the strength of one man's account of one tribe. Chagnon's so-called data, moreover, was not collected simply through dispassionate observation, but somehow involved upsetting more or less everyone he worked with, or even came across.²⁸ He cheerfully admits to causing some Indians considerable distress, and has even decided that the Yanomami came close to killing him on several occasions.

The *only* Amazonians on the graph who are not Yanomami are the Waorani (from Ecuador) and 'Jivaro' (a pejorative name for several peoples straddling the Peru-Ecuador

border). It's perfectly true that both had a bellicose reputation, *unlike* many of their neighboring tribes who simply didn't.²⁹ This is a very revealing point of course: these authors cherry-pick special cases.

Before considering the Waorani and 'Jivaro', it's worth noting that Jared Diamond, who also promulgates the 'Brutal Savage' myth, responded to my criticism of his book by claiming that he had the scientific data, and that I, and Survival International, romantically and falsely portray tribal peoples as universally peaceful.

Neither observation is true: as I and others have pointed out, the data presented by these authors is at least contentious, where it's not plain wrong. They go out of their way to portray tribes as 'Brutal Savages', describing rare customs which stopped generations ago and, in Pinker's case, even referring to their treatment of dogs, making it seem as though 'ours' are cared for so much better.³⁰

Survival makes no secret of the fact that tribal people, like everyone, fight and kill to varying degrees. Why hide it? We have personal experience. Two of Survival's founders, Robin Hanbury-Tenison and John Hemming, shared a house with student friend, Richard Mason, who was killed by uncontacted Brazilian Indians in 1961. Hemming escorted his body from the scene.

When I was staying in a settlement of Aguaruna ('Jivaroans') in the 1970s, there were deadly raids on a community a couple of miles away. Through missionary and petroleum company activity, most Aguaruna had been drawn into very populous

settlements along the riverbanks; before this, they lived in communities consisting of just one or two houses. Former enmities were greatly exacerbated by their new enforced proximity.

In generations past, some 'Jivaroans' are thought to have acquired ancient firearms from inter-tribal trading before they even saw a white man, and most certainly had shotguns well before the 1970s. All these facts are pertinent. I don't know if the high rate of deaths cited (these were raids, not 'war' as such) is truly representative of what these peoples did before the state came along in one or other of its invasive guises – nor does Pinker or anyone else.

Indeed, accounts of an *increase* in tribal violence following the arrival of missionaries can be found in several places – exactly the reverse of Pinker's thesis.³¹

By far the overall leader in Pinker's category of warlike folk turns out to be the Waorani of Ecuador, with a whopping over sixty percent being killed. The data comes, I think, from missionary-anthropologist, James Yost, and was pieced together in the 1970s.

The Waorani were undoubtedly viewed as 'brutal savages' by both their Indian and non-Indian neighbors. Over thirty years ago, I ignored warnings against walking into the territory of even the contacted ones, and there is no doubt that some Waorani played up to their notoriety. An elderly Indian once indicated that he would spear me if I didn't swap my newish machete for his rusty one. (I didn't; neither did he.)

Several years later, Waorani did kill the bishop missionary, Alejandro Labaca. He had insisted on being helicoptered in, with a nun as companion, landing near the house of an uncontacted group. He mistakenly believed his command of the Wao language, and the presence of a woman, would ensure safety. It didn't, as anyone could have predicted.

Uncontacted Indians are often dangerous because they know outsiders bring death and destruction, rather than Pinker's phantasmic peace.

These Indians live near the Napo, a huge Amazon tributary which has been a thoroughfare for centuries: it saw the first European exploration of the river basin in 1541-42 (Werner Herzog's film, 'Aguirre, Wrath of God' is a fictional dramatization). Waorani raided other Indian settlements for generations, both to steal things and as a warning to these outsiders to stay away. Their name for all non-Waorani is *cowode*, meaning 'cannibal'. 'We' might think they're pretty brutal, but the characterization is fully reciprocated: they think exactly the same of 'us'.

Pretending that any propensity to violence – which some individuals doubtless have – exists in isolation to their centuries-old struggle against invasion just won't wash. When I was with them, for example, they spotted signs that others were encroaching on their land, and immediately cut 'crossed spear' symbols on the paths: these were deadly warnings to keep out. I was in no doubt at all about their keenness to stop trespassers.

I have no theory about whether life with the Waorani, or any tribe, is really more threatening than in a Bogotá slum. I do know that it has never felt like that to me. Even Jared Diamond has suggested, though quietly, that the people he felt most endangered by in New Guinea were the Indonesian military, not the tribespeople.³²

Pinker doesn't sit in judgment over just the Waorani of course, but over all humankind. He concludes we are brutal savages until tamed by a nation state bringing peaceful civilization. As far as contemporary tribal peoples are concerned, it couldn't be further from the truth: the arrival of the state unleashes a savagery second to none in its brutality. The annihilation of countless Indian tribes throughout the Americas is just the best known of many examples.

Pinker also believes that civilization today is a function of upper class leadership and refinement trickling down to the lower orders. Many share this dogma, or a variation. For Maoists and Stalinists, for example, it is the Communist Party, not the upper classes(!), which bestows munificence and foresight. Otherwise, the plot is pretty much the same. The political and business elite, whether capitalist or communist, has a fierce vested interest in all of us swallowing similar hokum, even better if it's supposedly confirmed by 'science' and 'data'.

What strikes me as the most curious aspect of Pinker's very curious book is his title. I'm not convinced that, at heart, he really does think that human nature includes a 'better', or indeed any, 'angel' at all. In his view,

we are little more than animals shaped by pure biology, until the lucky (murderous) few invent the state and commerce, and are rescued by the resulting 'culture'. What others might call beauty, truth, goodness, or justice – that which gives us our humanity, those things which make the human mind different to other animals – have, in his view, only very recently come to the fore, and are still undeveloped for all who are not like 'us', or of 'our' time.

He goes further, he thinks that until about sixty years ago (around the time he was born!) human beings were both '*morally retarded*' and less intelligent than they are now. By that, he certainly doesn't mean *everyone* is brighter and more upright, he only means those (like him) who live in 'liberal democracies', such as the United States or western Europe! Others sadly remain less moral and less intelligent.

It's delusional nonsense of course – a breathtakingly arrogant, self-serving, and tired idea which diminishes human beings to something much less than we really are – and were. Were it to gain credence, it risks facilitating further cruelty: for example, it would falsely assert the benefits of state intervention in tribal peoples' lives, condemning some to a certain death sentence. However, they are far from being the only ones who should watch out when Pinker's on the prowl.

Pinker wants children's books, as well as history, rewritten because he thinks, '*the biggest delusion of all*' is '*nostalgia for a peaceable past*'. He makes the sweeping generalization

(which he deludes himself he's proven), '*We now know that native peoples, whose lives are so romanticized in today's children's books, had rates of death from warfare that were greater than those of our world wars.*' He presumably wants our children taught about humankind's '*gross*' past – as well as the brutality of savages today – so our kids are led to appreciate the sunlit uplands peaceful 'modernity' brings (to those like him). It's the Orwellian 'four legs good, two legs better'; it's also little wonder the establishment has embraced him so enthusiastically.

He claims scientific support for what is mere opinion by falsely charging contemporary tribal peoples, the 'stateless', and all our ancestors, with more or less unremitting villainy.

If you're not one of his peers, then beware the 'hanging judge', whose supporters petition *ad nauseam* that his opinions must be taken as universal, scientific, infallible. He's certainly dangerous, but it's high time for a retrial, and perhaps there's hope for a reprieve... for all of us.

Notes

¹ L H Keeley, *War before Civilization: the Myth of the Peaceful Savage*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1996.

² See 'Has Holocaust history just been rewritten? Astonishing new research shows Nazi camp network targeting Jews was 'twice as big as previously thought'' in *The Independent*. 3 March 2013, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/has-holocaust-history-just-been-rewritten-astonishing-new-research-shows-nazi-camp-network-targeting-jews-was-twice-as-big-as-previously-thought-8518407.html>>.

³ Matthew White has his own book, *The Great Big Book of Horrible Things*, (with a foreword and ringing endorsement by Steven Pinker) where he thinks 'only' 13 million were killed. However, White does not seem to be claiming *any* of this as fact. He states, 'Also, frankly, very little history is undisputed fact anyway. Most history is debatable interpretation of fact. On these pages, I'm offering you my interpretations, but obviously you should study other interpretations before you make up your own mind.' See <<http://users.erols.com/mwhite28/index.htm>>

⁴ '*Natural selection works on averages, so a willingness to take a small chance of dying as part of an aggressive coalition that offers a large chance of a big fitness payoff—more land, more women, or more safety—can be favored over the course of evolution.*' S Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: the Decline of Violence in History and its Causes*, Viking Penguin, London, 2011, p. 499.

⁵ Crevasses are – rather obviously – a sign of a glacier's flow, the equivalent of the rapids and cascades of a river. In some places sections of ice might not be able to move much, if at all, for example because they are hemmed in by rock walls. Where there's no flow, there are no crevasses.

⁶ A Fleckinger, *Ötzi, the Iceman*, Folio, Vienna/Bolzano, 2011. Thanks also to Katharina Hersel of the South Tyrolean Archaeological Museum, Bolzano/Bozen (personal communication, 2013).

⁷ Pinker, p. 26.

⁸ It's true that a single researcher suggested Ötzi's waterproof cape was, in fact, snowshoes, but a little thought might illuminate the fact that strapping a grass mat to one's soles in mountain terrain would not aid progress.

⁹ My story leaves two 'clues' unexplained: Ötzi's cut hand; and the 'fact' that blood from four different people was found on his equipment. Whether or not such blood existed is unproven: the Australian academic who made the claim took his unpublished

findings to the grave. Ötzi's bow was certainly drenched in blood. The scientist who discovered this proposed two likely explanations: that it was deliberately painted with blood, as a known waterproofing, or that it came from Ötzi's cut hand. There are of course any number of explanations for the cut, not involving raiding.

¹⁰ See 'Thirteen Italians die in bloody start to hunt season', Reuters. 22 October 2012, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/10/22/italy-hunting-deaths-idUSL5E8LMHXF20121022>>.

¹¹ E.g. Leslie Sponsel, 'human prehistory is relatively free of systematic evidence of organized violence'. <<http://peacefulsocieties.org/Archtext/Sponsel96.pdf>>. See also, D Fry (ed.). War, Peace, and Human Nature: The Convergence of Evolutionary and Cultural Views, OUP, Oxford, 2013.

¹² E.g. John Gray, Elizabeth Kolbert, as well as Edward S Herman and David Peterson who wrote a detailed rebuttal of Steven Pinker's data, 'Reality Denial: Steven Pinker's Apologetics for Western-Imperial Violence'.

¹³ In this case, there is real evidence that they were killed, but it's not because they are in a communal grave. There are plenty of innocent reasons for that. Probably England's most famous and poignant communal grave, for example, dates from 1666 when Elizabeth Hancock buried her husband and six children in the space of a single week. Miraculously, she survived the plague which carried them off, one tragically following the other to their final resting place.

¹⁴ Voltaire was arrested following one challenge, and brushed aside another. Peel apologized to one challenger, another was detained. Pinker is probably confusing Napoleon Bonaparte, who was fervently against dueling, with his nephew (also a Napoleon, but hardly a 'luminary') who was challenged to a duel, which was never fought. It's true that Wellington did 'fight' a duel. In 1829, he challenged Lord Winchilsea over the latter's accusation that the Iron Duke was too pro-Catholic. The men met in south London and, on the order to fire, Winchilsea kept his pistol firmly down. Wellington shot and deliberately missed (that's his story anyway!), whereupon Winchilsea fired into the air. Like most duels, it was hardly the most violent of meetings: duelling was largely not intended to kill, but merely to prove 'honor'. According to Oren Falk, 'most historical societies in which duelling was frequent did not practise it as a killing sport' (Personal communication 2013). Mark Twain even observed (in *A Tramp Abroad*) that, 'the best physician in Paris has expressed the opinion that if he goes on duelling for fifteen or twenty years more – unless he forms the habit of fighting in a comfortable room where damp or draughts cannot intrude – he will eventually endanger his life.'

¹⁵ At least eighteen countries have these weapons though most won't admit it. Only the USA and UK are known to have used them in war.

¹⁶ W Freeman, 'Nonlinear brain dynamics and intention according to Aquinas'. *Mind and Matter*, vol. 6, number 2, 2008, pp. 207-234.

¹⁷ The foundations for Western music were also laid down at this time. Medieval Europeans were of course engineers and scientists too, adapting and refining the Chinese inventions of the cannon and magnetic compass, to cite just a couple of world-shattering devices.

¹⁸ Guatemalan boss, General Ríos Montt, who was trained in the United States, is the only head of state ever tried for genocide in his own country. President Reagan, who supported him, described him having, 'great personal integrity,' adding, 'I know he wants to improve the quality of life for all Guatemalans.'

¹⁹ S Corry, 'Savaging Primitives: Why Jared Diamond's 'The World Until Yesterday' is wrong' in *Survival International*. January 2013, viewed on 18 March 2013, <<http://assets.survivalinternational.org/documents/884/corry-on-diamond.pdf>>.

²⁰ In another of his graphs, '*Rate of death in warfare in nonstate and state societies*', he picks twenty-seven 'nonstate' tribal peoples. In this case, over forty percent are from New Guinea. Pinker, p. 53.

²¹ Corry, op.cit., p. 3.

²² See <<http://tapol.org/press-statements/angry-papuan-leaders-demand-jared-diamond-apologises>>.

²³ N Chagnon, *Noble Savages: My life among two dangerous tribes – the Yanomamö and the anthropologists*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2013, p. 19.

²⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 15, 19.

²⁵ Pinker claims, 'A modern concern with the dignity and rights of all peoples inhibits us from speaking too frankly about rates of violence in preliterate peoples, and the "anthropologists of peace" have worked to give them a Rousseauian image makeover... Anthropologists who did not get with the program found themselves barred from the territories in which they had worked, denounced in manifestoes by their professional societies, slapped with libel lawsuits, and even accused of genocide.' As far as I can tell, there was a single anthropologist who was 'barred', 'denounced' etc. – Napoleon Chagnon.

²⁶ The 'Yanomami' consist of a number of sub-groups all speaking closely related, largely mutually intelligible, languages. They had no name which encompassed all of them. Different anthropologists have come up with different choices, including 'Yanomami' which has become the accepted term, and is now also widely used by them (Chagnon calls them 'Yanomamö').

²⁷ See <<http://www.livinganthropologically.com/2013/03/16/brian-ferguson-napoleon-chagnon>> and <http://anthroniche.com/darkness_documents/0246.htm>.

²⁸ Chagnon violated taboos about naming the dead. He also caused internal divisions by rewarding particular individuals with gifts, including weapons. See for example, 'How Napoleon Chagnon Became Our Most Controversial Anthropologist' in *The New York Times*. 13 February 2013, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/17/magazine/napoleon-chagnon-americas-most-controversial-anthropologist.html?pagewanted=all>>.

²⁹ For example, Pinker quotes Rafael Karsten on 'Jivaro' *'wars of extermination'*. He omits to tell us that Karsten described the 'Jivaro' as, 'the most warlike of all Indian tribes in South America'. (R Karsten, *Blood, Revenge, War and Victory Feasts among the Jibara Indians of Eastern Ecuador*, 1923, p. 1).

³⁰ Pinker says, *'The cutting or cooking of live animals by traditional peoples is far from uncommon... Pets too are treated harshly: a recent cross-cultural survey found that half the traditional cultures that keep dogs as pets kill them, usually for food.'* This is one of only three times in the seven hundred-page book where the phrase *'traditional cultures'* occurs, and the only time *'traditional peoples'* appears. Pinker doesn't define them, but it's not difficult to see that it's part of his denigration of tribal peoples. So, skipping over the fact that Americans cook (and mail) lobsters and eat oysters when they are still living, let's examine the 'survey' Pinker (mis)cites. 'Human-Pet Dynamics in Cross-Cultural Perspective' (Gray & Young, 2011) is in fact an outline of what the electronic Human Relations Area Files say about a sample set of sixty – not necessarily 'traditional' – societies. The original data is drawn from different, often pretty dated, sources. If it can be called a 'survey' at all (its authors don't), then it's a survey of some of the literature. Anyway, of the sixty listed societies, twenty-two were deemed to have kept pet dogs, and eleven apparently killed them in some circumstances. Pinker turns this into, *'half the traditional cultures that keep dogs as pets kill them'*. However, the source does not mention *which* of the sixty listed societies had pet dogs, nor which ones killed them, nor identify any societies as 'traditional' or otherwise. It does cite a few examples (e.g. with a Saami account, over seventy years old) where dogs were killed when they had grown too old (in North America and Europe, it's called 'putting to sleep', or 'putting down'). The sample includes folk like the Sinhalese (most Sri Lankans), Korea (sic), Central Thai (where Bangkok is situated), Highland Scots, Serbs, and Brazilians from the state of Bahia. None of these are tribal peoples; others in the sample are, or were. It may be that every dog-killing society was 'traditional', but the paper doesn't say that. As so often, Pinker tries to lead us to a conclusion not actually supported by the data he cites. Now, let's consider what happens to stray dogs in the United States and Europe: they are taken to shelters and then, if no one wants them and space is limited, they are 'put down'. In other words, we kill dogs too! In his section on our increasing kindness to animals (which is why he brings up the nastiness of 'traditional cultures'), Pinker omits to mention the illegal, multi-million dollar 'sport' of dog fighting, which is reportedly widespread in the United States and Europe. Nor does he cite the extensive suffering resulting from our playing Frankenstein and creating 'pure' breeds. The British RSPCA makes the point, 'A recent study showed that all of the fifty most popular dog breeds have some aspect of their body which can cause suffering.' Many have deformed bones such as hip dysplasia (Bulldogs), others have difficulty seeing (Poodle), hearing (Dalmatian), or even breathing (Pekingese). Perhaps Pinker needs to look again at how we really treat dogs (as well as stop imagining British foxhunters used Bloodhounds).

³¹ E.g. When missionaries introduced Christianity to some communities in Papua New Guinea, the dismantling of the order created by the men's house served to increase violence.

³² In a talk at the Royal Society of Arts, London, 5 Feb 2013.