

Pinker Versus Harari on the Future of Humankind
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Steven Pinker has become the leader of the “What Me Worry, Pollyanna” troops when it comes to assessing the current challenges that humanity faces. In several of his works, including Enlightenment Now [2018], he sings the praises of the progress that humanity has made since the Enlightenment under the influence of reason, science and technology, and he only grudgingly admits to a few of the significant challenges that loom in the present. Unfortunately, progress made in the past does not predict success in the future, especially when the challenges of the present are global in scale and no adequate global social structure exists to address/manage them – one of my main points. Pinker is far too quick to dismiss as unsubstantiated the real challenges now before humanity without providing evidence of effective strategies for continuing to address/resolve them – much less any evidence for successful implementation of such strategies. Examples: 1) “Nuclear conflict is not a problem because we have avoided it to date,” while not considering the problem of continued proliferation to societies with apocalyptic worldviews. Or, 2) “There is plenty of food to feed all of humanity,” without considering the effects of the 2 billion projected population increase at the same time the viability of soils worldwide is being depleted, ocean acidification and over fishing are severely restricting ocean food resources, water use from ancient aquifers is unsustainable, arable land in the key temperate production zone is being lost to climate change, etc. The issue is not what we are able to do NOW in light of the approach we have taken to the present, but whether the approach that we have come to depend upon is sustainable. In my view, Pinker is far too glib.

A much better assessment of the current state of affairs for global humanity that is not alarmist but which is realistic is by Yuval Noah Harari, 21 Lessons for the 21st Century, New York, 2018. Harari is a recognized expert futurist. His reasoned evaluations of the full array of significant variables is impressive. In the end, he is most concerned about the potential of an insufficiently regulated combination of biotech/engineering, artificial intelligence, big data, and robotics – under the influence of the forces of capitalism – to introduce changes into the genetic base of humans that undermine/supplant current humanity as a whole.

The objective for those of us who are concerned about the direction humanity is currently heading is to engender awareness of the situation as a whole while avoiding both unproductive social paralysis caused by fear and dismissive contentions arising from over confidence or complacency.