

## “ENLIGHTENMENT NOW”

In his new book *“Enlightenment Now:”*<sup>1</sup> Steven Pinker presents an optimistic picture of humanity today and of its future prospects. His argument is that, since the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment movement was established as the dominant force, humanity has been and still is making immense progress in every area. He bases his case on a myriad of statistics and charts that cover a vast range of human and natural domains. This worldview supplements Eoin Treacy’s reasoning in favour of long term investments given that huge waves of the world’s poor are seeing their material standard of living rising dramatically thanks to Globalisation and the application of new technologies.

Pinker defines Humanism as *“the goal of maximizing human flourishing – life, health, happiness, freedom, knowledge, love, richness of experience..”*<sup>2</sup> and by including it as one of the pillars of Enlightenment he avoids a purely materialistic vision of progress. Nevertheless, the statistics that he quotes reveal an amazing picture of the “wonderful world”<sup>3</sup> in which the vast majority of humanity lives today. The facts belie many of the pessimistic myths about our world without denying in the slightest way the current difficulties that we are facing. At every stage of human progress new difficulties have appeared and each time humans applying reason and science have overcome them. There is no reason why this should not continue. For example, the environmental dangers are realities but we humans, who created them, are also developing solutions for them.

The world’s population has risen from 4 billion in 1974 to 7.6 billions today. This 90% increase has been accompanied by the elimination of famine throughout almost the whole world so that today, with the exception of one or two areas in Africa, obesity is becoming the more serious health problem. Since 1961 the land used for growing food has increased by 12% and the quantity of food by 300%. Many notorious killer diseases have been virtually totally eliminated. In 2016 there were only 37 reported cases of poliomyelitis in the whole world. The number of reported cases of guinea worm in the first quarter of 2017 was 3 occurring in a single country compared with 3.5 million in 1986 in 21 countries. Bill Gates is lauded by Pinker as one the greatest human beings in history for his science-based fight to eradicate malaria and it is not surprising that the founder of Microsoft has called this *“My new favourite book of all time”*.

Today illiteracy among both men and women is declining rapidly. Absolute income, which is much more important than relative income, is both rising and being more evenly spread in the developing world. Extreme poverty is being replaced by a middle class world. 6.6 billion people out of 7.6 billion are not extremely poor. Amongst the five causes of progress, Pinker mentions one of David and Eoin’s pillars, namely “good governance’ as democracy has spread across the world. He uses the same arguments as Eoin to show how market forces produce price fluctuations in the area of raw materials in such a way that there is no shortage of them because when their prices rise consumption of them falls and exploration for them increases.

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<sup>1</sup> Pinker, Steven, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress*, NY, Viking 2018.

<sup>2</sup> *Idem* p. 410

<sup>3</sup> Ray Charles

His view is that it is wrong to stop producing nuclear energy. Science and technology should be applied to make it safer and to solve the waste problem since this is the most environmentally-friendly source of energy. We should be applying these two instruments to use less energy to produce more objects. The trend toward dematerialisation is a step in the right direction.

In the non-material parts of the book he shows how the application of Enlightenment thinking has changed the dominant human values. There are many fewer wars in the world today because Woodstock did win and we are “giving peace a chance”. There has been an 85% fall in nuclear arsenals. In 2015 there were 175 deaths from terrorism in western Europe compared with 126,482 deaths from all accidents. One must keep an open mind on the statistics that he uses to argue that the vast majority of humanity is becoming “happier” since this is a very subjective concept. However, based on surveys in which people rate their “happiness” it would appear that more and more people in the world state that this is the case.

Pinker writes that the failure of the middle class in the first world countries to win out in the Globalisation process is the major reason for the success of “populism”. He argues that the Nietzschean worldview as expressed in this populist movement is the enemy of humanism leading to authoritarianism, nationalism, reactionary thinking and even fascism. In this optic the tribe, race or nation is glorified as the “*strong species of man*”<sup>4</sup>. When Theresa May stated “*a citizen of the world is a citizen of nowhere*”<sup>5</sup> she expressed the Romantic nationalism which Pinker calls “Fascism Lite”.

You will not be surprised to read that Pinker takes a very critical approach to religion. However, he is honest enough to state that many individuals are motivated by religious beliefs to undertake very humane acts. He argues that beliefs in religions are holding back progress in large parts of the world and in particular in Muslim countries. Surveys show that it is these countries that the largest proportion of the population take religion literally and where the objective measures of progress are weakest. At the same time, in the rest of the world it is the growing disbelief in the God-explanation of the universe i.e. atheism that is growing most rapidly. “*Humanism, which promotes a non-supernatural basis for meaning and ethics: good without God*”<sup>6</sup> is winning and “*the worldview that guides the moral and spiritual values of a knowledgeable person today is the worldview given to us by science*”.<sup>7</sup> One of the most important instruments for countering the Nietzschean worldview is education based on reason and science and, in particular, courses in Critical Thinking.

Pinker’s book has been subject to normal and legitimate criticism, mainly from ideological conservatives and God-believers. This is a very short commentary on a book that I recommend to all Fuller Treacy subscribers because it offers what I consider to be a relatively objective vision of the wonderful things that human beings, using reason, science and humanism, have, are and will bring to the Progress of Humanity.

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<sup>4</sup> *idem* p 447

<sup>5</sup> Conservative Party Congress 2016

<sup>6</sup> *idem* p 410

<sup>7</sup> *idem* p. 391

Alan Frommer.  
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