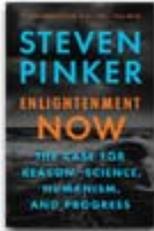


***Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress,*  
Steven Pinker, ISBN: 978-80525427575.**



Steven Pinker's latest work, *Enlightenment Now*, provides an optimistic outlook on the current state of world affairs. According to Pinker, all is not doom and gloom—and he spends 453 pages explaining why. But the book isn't solely a response to the seemingly Earth-enveloping cloud of despair many Americans have felt since the 2016 election. Pinker declares in the preface: “this book is not about the forty-fifth president of the United States and his advisors. It was conceived some years before Donald Trump announced his candidacy, and I hope it will outlast his administration by many more.”

Pinker appeals to Enlightenment-era philosophy—the idea that reason, science, and humanism can solve humanity's problems—as he addresses various aspects of modern society that are indeed improved, historically speaking (and don't worry, if you don't remember what the Enlightenment was—Pinker spends part one of the book, titled “Enlightenment,” filling you in). Life expectancy is higher, people are healthier, generally wealth is more widespread and inequality less profound, people are generally happier—you get the idea. And you don't have to take Pinker's word for it—the book is chock-full of graphs and tables, visual representations of well-sourced data proving Pinker's points.

While certainly enlightening (pardon the pun), Pinker's book reads more like an interesting textbook than a work of popular science nonfiction. This is not a bad thing, but it definitely feels geared toward a narrow, highly educated audience: those “liberal academic elites” who were both baffled and devastated by the outcome of the 2016 election (you don't throw around words like “metastasizing,” “abeyance,” and “vicissitudes” if you want to reach a broad audience—even *The New York Times* has an 8<sup>th</sup> grade vocabulary rule). Despite Pinker's claim that the book is not a direct response to the Trump presidency, in many ways it feels like one—a reassurance that all is not lost to those for whom reason dictated that Trump could not win, and even a year and a half into his presidency, still cannot grasp how he did (Russian election meddling aside, Trump did and does still have a fair amount of supporters, unless Putin paid people individually to show up at all those rallies).

One bone to pick with Pinker: on page 252, in the chapter “Quality of Life” (which falls under Progress), he starts a paragraph with “As a feminist-era husband I can truthfully use the first-person plural in celebrating this gain”—the gain he is referring to is the invention of the washing machine, and the freedom it gave women to join the workforce and pursue other interests, aside from just hand-washing laundry day-in and day-out. Given the widespread reverberation of the #MeToo movement across dozens of industries—including academia—and the media storm that A-lister Matt Damon faced after he was questioned about Harvey Weinstein and qualified his response with one of those “as a father of four daughters”—*someone* should have taken this line out. It casts a somewhat unpleasant pall—certainly a highly educated academic like Pinker, who not so subtly digs at Trump throughout the book, should be clever enough not fall into such a classic pitfall. Advice for all: anytime you catch yourself, in writing or out loud, qualifying yourself “as a \_\_\_\_\_”—just don't.

*Review by Jeanette S. Ferrara, MA*