

**Steven Pinker. *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*.
New York: Penguin Books, 2018.**

Reviewed by Ashok Kumar Malhotra

Steven Pinker's monumental work, *Enlightenment Now, The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* is an impressive volume. He presents his position so vividly that the book reached the New York Times Bestseller List, and received enthusiastic reviews from diverse scholars and readers. Even Bill Gates regards it as: "My new favorite book of all time."

Pinker describes clearly the essential ideals of Enlightenment. The language is simple and comprehensible to the readers of the present century. He outlines his position as follows: "I will first lay out a framework for understanding the human condition informed by modern science — who we are, where we came from, what our challenges are, and how we can meet them." The bulk of the book is devoted to defending those ideals in a distinctively 21st-century way: with data. This evidence-based take on the Enlightenment project reveals that it was not a naive hope. The Enlightenment has worked — perhaps the greatest story seldom told. And because this triumph is so unsung, the underlying ideals of reason, science, and humanism are unappreciated as well. Far from being an insipid consensus, these ideals are treated by today's intellectuals with indifference, skepticism, and sometimes contempt. When properly appreciated, "I will suggest, the ideals of the Enlightenment are in fact stirring, inspiring, noble — a reason to live." (p. 1)

Pinker criticizes two strong currents — one historical and the other more recent. Under historical, he argues specifically against Catholicism, Christianity in general, and Islam, along with all religions. He shows the way religions have downgraded *reason* by upgrading *faith* in the scriptures and rituals and how through coercion and force they have restrained any opposition.

The other is a more recent movement. It is perpetuated by the intellectuals influenced by Nietzsche, a 19th century philosopher. His ideology reeked of negativity, with utter disdain for the common man and woman. Through promulgating the notion of the *Übermensch* and creation of the pure race, Nietzsche swayed the intellectuals and dictators of the 20th century leading to innumerable atrocities against various groups of people, especially the Jews.

Pinker's book is divided into three parts. Part 1 deals with the definition of Enlightenment as presented by Immanuel Kant, an 18th century philosopher. This is followed by a quote from David Deutsch, a 21st century scientist describing the positive contributions of Enlightenment.

Part II outlines misgivings of the intellectuals suffering from *Progressophobia* — the dread of progress. To counter the *Progressophobia*, Pinker describes the most significant improvements brought by Enlightenment regarding life, health, sustenance, wealth, inequality, environment, peace, safety, terrorism, democracy, equal rights, knowledge, quality of life, happiness, existential threats and future of progress. Part III concludes by highlighting the development of reason, science and humanism, the windfall of Enlightenment for all of us living in the 21st century.

Pinker presents a praiseworthy history of Enlightenment starting with Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau and Diderot as well as Kant during the 17th and 18th centuries and its blossoming in the 21st century. He argues his position convincingly in a language understandable to the reader of the present century. Furthermore, he justifies it through 75 graphs as evidence of progress made by all humanity. He cites convincing data showing an upswing in prosperity, longevity, education, health and political freedom as well as equality of men and women and medical breakthroughs.

Pinker's book consists of 453 pages. Furthermore, it includes 37 pages of Notes, 31 pages of References, 31 pages of Index and 75 Graphs. This wealth of material on diverse aspects of Enlightenment presented with special elegance makes the book enjoyable to read. Moreover, whether it is reason or science or humanism or progress, he argues his case eloquently by documenting it well and then justifying it through the appropriate data.

Though Pinker makes an excellent case for the positive contributions of Enlightenment; however, he ignores the negative aspects that have caused a great split and rift between the white race and others who are black and brown. In his *Genghis Khan and Making of the Modern World*, Jack Weatherford delineates some of these harmful aspects of Enlightenment ignored by Pinker in his otherwise well-researched book.

A long time ago, Mark Twain said: "A successful book is not what it contains but what it leaves out." It is a fitting description of Pinker's views on Enlightenment.

Weatherford asserts that while Voltaire and Montesquieu powerfully articulated the positive ideals of Enlightenment, they also wrote books that demonized the black and brown races as less developed than the Whites. To add insult to injury, even the scientists of that time wrote works to justify this under-development of the black and brown races. The same scientists went further to use the term "Mongoloid" for the White children born with various deformities.

Guided by this racial bias, the White Europeans used force to capture people from Africa to be sold as slaves to the recently discovered North and South Americas.

As the slave ships were arriving in the Americas, Enlightenment had just begun in Europe. Thousands of black Africans who were shipped to America to cultivate the fields made the USA the biggest producer of cotton and tobacco in the world.

Spain and Portugal were the major players in exploiting the black and brown races in the Americas. France, which produced Voltaire and Montesquieu as the pioneers of Enlightenment, went ahead to colonize Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and countries in the Pacific and Caribbean regions. This was done under the pretense of civilizing them. In their turn, England took over America (USA) through killing and subduing the Native Americans, and declaring it as its colony. England, France, along with Portugal and Dutch went on a rampage to colonize the countries of Africa, India, South and East Asia, Hong Kong and Macao. Along with occupying India, the British fought a war with the last Mughal emperor in 1857. After defeating him, they declared India as part of the British Empire. They slaughtered the children, grandchildren and great grandchildren of the Mughals so that no traces of Mongol blood would be left anywhere. Furthermore, though the Muslims, Hindus, Rajputs, Jats and others fought against the tyranny of colonization, the victorious British called this war as *a mutiny* because *as victors they were writing the history*.

The British not only recruited the young men of India to fight their World Wars 1 and 2, they also financed these wars through the Indian treasury. Following the footsteps of other European countries, the USSR went ahead to colonize Mongolia by capturing and butchering as many Mongols as possible so that no offspring of Genghis Khan or Kublai Khan would be left on the face of the earth.

According to Weatherford, before Enlightenment there was no such racial bias or hatred displayed toward the Mongols and other races. This is clearly evident during the Renaissance. The writers of this period and explorers like Columbus were actually impressed by the ingenuity of the Mongol conquerors. They admired their attempt at unifying the world through breaking barriers among the occupied nations in order to create a global village.

However, all the Western countries, which gave us the ideals of Enlightenment, were themselves the worst offenders. France and England were the biggest colonialists along with the USA. For example, the USA, which proclaimed to be the first country to write a democratic constitution, had more slaves than any other nation. Moreover, the founders of the US constitution were the major wrongdoers. They owned the largest number of Africans as slaves along with capturing the land from the Native Americans, signing treaties with them, and renegeing on these agreements.

At an intellectual level, Pinker discredits Nietzsche as being anti-enlightenment, anti-reason and anti-humanism. He asserts that Nietzsche's negativism rubbed off on the major thinkers of the 19th and 20th centuries.

He includes among them Heidegger, Sartre, George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells and other intellectuals making up the backbone of the 20th century. Though he calls them misled intellectuals, he does not discuss how and why they should be branded as such.

Let's take the case of Sartre, who was influenced by Nietzsche. Pinker brands him as against enlightenment, reason and humanism. However, it was Sartre who wrote his famous book on *Existentialism is Humanism*. Here he defended his position on humanism, freedom and responsibility. Furthermore, he showed the concrete expression of these concepts in *The Flies*, *Dirty Hands*, *Respectful Prostitute* and a trilogy entitled *Roads to Freedom*. Moreover, he devoted in excess of 150 pages on freedom and responsibility in his magnum opus *Being and Nothingness*. Since in his writings Sartre gave prominence to reason and its materializing into humanism, he clearly indicated that he was inspired by the ideals of Enlightenment which became the hallmark of his existentialism.

Interestingly enough, Pinker who devotes half a dozen pages to the rise of Trump, asserts that 136 intellectuals including Steve Bannon and Michael Anton supported him to win his presidency in 2016. Furthermore, he holds these intellectuals culpable because they were influenced by Nietzsche's philosophy. However, he does not provide any discussion of how these intellectuals used or abused this philosophy toward these destructive ends.

Others, who have read Nietzsche and his works, will disagree with Pinker by arguing that Nietzsche was a philosopher fed by the standards set forth by Enlightenment. Nietzsche's thinking was rooted in the long philosophical tradition of interpreting and re-interpreting reason, freedom and humanism. Indeed, the ideals of reason and freedom enunciated by Kant got a push from Hegel, whose dialectical logic influenced Schopenhauer, who in turn imparted them to Nietzsche. By openly challenging religion, Nietzsche offered his brand of humanism through the creation of the overman. Similar to the thinkers of Enlightenment, Nietzsche revolted against religion by declaring that God is dead and therefore human fate and destiny are in their own hands.

The biggest weakness of Pinker's work is that here he is "gung-ho" on the positive contributions of the Enlightenment by excluding its negative hand-outs spilling into racism, colonialism, apartheid, Hitlerism, Mussolinism, Stalinism and other dictatorships. This is clearly exemplified in the elevation of Trump to a cult figure and Trumpism to a cult resulting into the takeover of the US Capitol building on January 6, 2021. The Trump followers who were asserting their "white privilege" could have destroyed the very foundation of a model Democratic Republic. In their opinion, they might have construed this revolting attempt as based on the positive principles of the Enlightenment!

My recommendation to Pinker is to write a sequel to his present volume outlining the negative aspects of the Enlightenment responsible for the numerous political, social, economic and environmental upheavals facing humanity during the 21st century. Here he could synthesize both the positive and negative aspects of the Enlightenment by presenting a more honest and balanced global picture. There is a need for such a book in order to understand the existential predicament of the present-day human being. Hopefully, such a work might help humanity to make progress at a faster pace toward humanism and world peace.