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The liberal illusion of automatic progress

Proclaiming the inevitability of human progress too often turns a blind eye to criticism of capitalism and social inequality

Read this article in German or Russian.

It sounds so simple and plausible. 'Just look around: We have to fight for democracy! Right now, because time is running out. Liberalism, open society and democracy are all under threat, and they need us. So dare to think for yourself! And take a stand! A lot of things are good and are getting better. We have to believe in progress! It will come for sure. It is up to us to create greater belief in progress.'

This mindset is common among 'democrats' in many places nowadays. In Germany, it is downright typical for the Greens. But even the Merkel wing of the Christian Democrats (CDU) and the Social Democrats (SPD) are home to many who share this view.

'Enlightenment now!' could be their slogan. Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker has just presented a book with this title that is practically overflowing with belief in progress. Pinker is a man on a mission. His manifesto seeks to show that things are going well – at least broadly speaking. His tribute to progress comes across like a guru's mantra with statistical legitimation. For him, progress is real. For him, it is objectively certain that things are moving in the right direction and will continue to do so.

After reading it, some Green parliamentarians in Berlin may feel emboldened enough to say: I told you so!

A naive 'everything is good' philosophy

Pinker's message is: 'When lots of things are good, we should talk about it. Communication matters!' A data-driven psychologist like Steven

Pinker, who sees himself as a dedicated scientist, distances himself from postmodernism and other objectivity-sceptical positions. That might leave a bad taste in the mouth of the Greens in Berlin with their hedonistic individualism. After all, is it not the case that postmodernism offers the promise of a joyous 'anything goes' in which diversity stands at odds with progress? This is the mindset of optimistic postmodernism.

And yet Pinker is a man whose work could serve as the model for something I describe in my book 'Die liberale Illusion' (The Liberal Illusion) as 'liberal Hegelianism'.

Progress does not happen by itself.

I define this as preaching an 'everything is good' philosophy starting from the profoundly naive notion that everything will somehow automatically be 'good'. Here are echoes of the neoliberal market philosophy: If everyone thinks of themselves, everyone will be thought of, and the invisible hand of the market will guide everyone to happiness.

I consider this kind of belief in progress, coupled with the somewhat aggressive denigration of anyone who expresses concerns or doubts, to be dangerous. In particular, when it is presented in the guise of scientific objectivity. And that is exactly what Pinker is doing.

Progress has to be fought for

Pinker might be called a good left-liberal. He is certainly no neoliberal. But he is helping to promote a mood of breakthrough that ultimately tends to obscure the truth of the matter.

This is because 'technological progress' is not something that simply falls into your lap, let alone 'social progress'. It has to be fought for. Progress does not happen by itself. 'History can be made,' Rudi Dutschke, a prominent spokesperson of the German student movement of the 1960s, once said. And to make history, we must go 'where it seethes, smells and stinks', as SPD politician Sigmar Gabriel put it. But instead, Pinker's book gives every post-materialistic Harvard student in their cosy sphere of fellow elites the justification to see everything as good just the way it is, meaning they no longer have to get angry about the state of things. And yet only those who sense criticism, those who perceive the shortcomings of the present, those who believe the state of things is still not good enough – they are the only ones who will roll up their sleeves and try to make things better.

Perhaps Pinker's next book should explicitly address social inequality, poverty and the erosion of the American dream.

'All great political action consists of, and begins with, speaking out about that which is. All political petty-mindedness consists of being silent and covering up that which is.' That was the view of Ferdinand Lassalle, co-founder of German social democracy. According to Rosa Luxemburg, meanwhile, the 'most revolutionary act' is to 'always loudly say that which is'.

Sticking to reality: a difficult task

Steven Pinker might well retort: Yes, but that which is turns out to be better than it may seem. Public debate has been skewed by prophets of doom like Donald Trump. To see culture in decline would be erroneous in light of the 'reality'. Things are going well for us – certainly in a broader historical context.

And that is where we reach a sticking point. Because what is 'reality'? Are we badmouthing it or sugarcoating it? In my book, I argue that we have fallen for a 'liberal illusion' that makes us tend to paint the world as better than it actually is. I have sought to back this up with a wide range of statistics and evidence. There are certainly similarities with Pinker, in other words.

But Pinker ultimately says almost the exact opposite. He says: We are talking reality down. So who is right? Whose data and statistics are more persuasive? Does the truth lie somewhere in the middle? Or is one of us completely wrong?

I am opposed to this becoming a question of faith. We need to stick to reality'. We need to understand it fully. This may be difficult.

However, my view is that Pinker overstates things and too often turns a blind eye to criticism of capitalism and social conditions. 'The return of the social question' suggests itself empirically.

Perhaps Pinker's next book should explicitly address social inequality, poverty and the erosion of the American dream. Maybe then he will open his eyes to the fact that not everything is as good as he wants us to believe.



Nils Heisterhagen
Mainz

Nils Heisterhagen is a social democrat author of the book 'Die liberale Illusion. Warum wir einen linken Realismus brauchen' (*The liberal illusion. Why we need a left-wing realism*) in Dietz-Verlag.

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