

Steven Pinker Survives Attempted Cancellation

RONALD BAILEY | FROM THE OCTOBER 2020 ISSUE



(Scott Nobles)

In early July, a group of linguistics researchers published an open letter calling for the Linguistics Society of America (LSA) to revoke the organization's distinguished fellow status from linguist and cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker, author of *The Language Instinct*, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, and *Enlightenment Now*.

The signatories, many of them graduate and undergraduate students, pointed to years-old tweets of Pinker's that they claimed revealed his racist and sexist biases. Almost immediately, a group of established scholars leapt to his defense. "The letter shows no familiarity with Pinker's work, and takes statements out of context

in a way that, with the merest checking, are seen to be represented duplicitously," wrote Jerry Coyne, an evolutionary biologist at the University of Chicago. Academics from across the disciplinary and political spectrum joined Coyne in rebutting the letter, including linguist (and *Reason* contributor) John McWhorter, leftist firebrand Noam Chomsky, and formal semantics pioneer Barbara Partee.

In a conversation with *Reason* Science Correspondent Ronald Bailey on the day the LSA announced it would not take any action against him, Pinker explained what efforts like the LSA letter tell us about the state of debate in America's elite institutions.

Q: This LSA letter is an astonishing document.

A: I think it's part of a larger mindset that does not see the world as having complex problems that we fail to understand and ought to try to understand better to diagnose and treat, but rather as a kind of warfare between powerful elites and oppressed masses. In the classic Marxist analysis, these would be economic classes, but they've been transformed to racial and sexual classes.

In this mindset, analysis, debate, evidence are just tools—propaganda exercised by those in power. What has to happen is not a deeper understanding of social problems, but a wresting of power from elites and redistributing it to the disenfranchised.

Q: You've said the letter wasn't specifically about you, but it was quite targeted.

A: It was quite targeted, but it's part of a larger movement seeking monsters to destroy. That is, to look for prominent people and do "offense archeology," which is to troll through tweets and statements seeking to find evidence, however tortured, that there's some kind of prejudice behind them.

Q: The writers of the letter said that by challenging the claim that police are more likely to kill black people than to kill white people, you showed a "willingness to dismiss and downplay racist violence regardless of any evidence."

A: That's completely wrong. It's an open question to what extent police are racially biased. As a social scientist, I consider it my responsibility to try to understand that in light of the facts. You're literally committing a logical blunder if you hold a belief that police are more likely to shoot unarmed African Americans and you don't count up all the people police shoot. That is by no means a denial of the existence of racism.

There's a distinct question of whether African Americans are subject to more *sublethal* harassment, and I think your former colleague Radley Balko wrote a very good summary for *The Washington Post* that shows there is evidence of racial discrimination in harassment and man-handling and arrests. But when it comes to lethal incidents, the evidence suggests that there isn't.

Q: I'm trying to get a sense, from your point of view, of why your critics would misread what you are doing.

A: [There's a] mindset that we evaluate what people mean based on whether the underlying idea is likely to be true or false; that we should use evidence in doing so; that all of us, in large part, start from a position of ignorance when dealing with social problems; and that the imperative is to understand their causes and therefore arrive at the best possible solutions.

There's an alternative mindset in which the content of someone's statements and attempts to evaluate them with respect to evidence are beside the point. The imperative is not to examine ideas that may be true or false; it is to maximize passion and solidarity. Because the elites are already in a position of power and the downtrodden have only their own solidarity and emotional passion as countermeasures, therefore anything that undermines the passion and solidarity is harmful in the struggle. And it is a struggle! It's a kind of warfare that is zero-sum, and the imperative is to change the power balance.

This interview has been condensed and edited for style and clarity.

RONALD BAILEY is science correspondent at *Reason*.

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