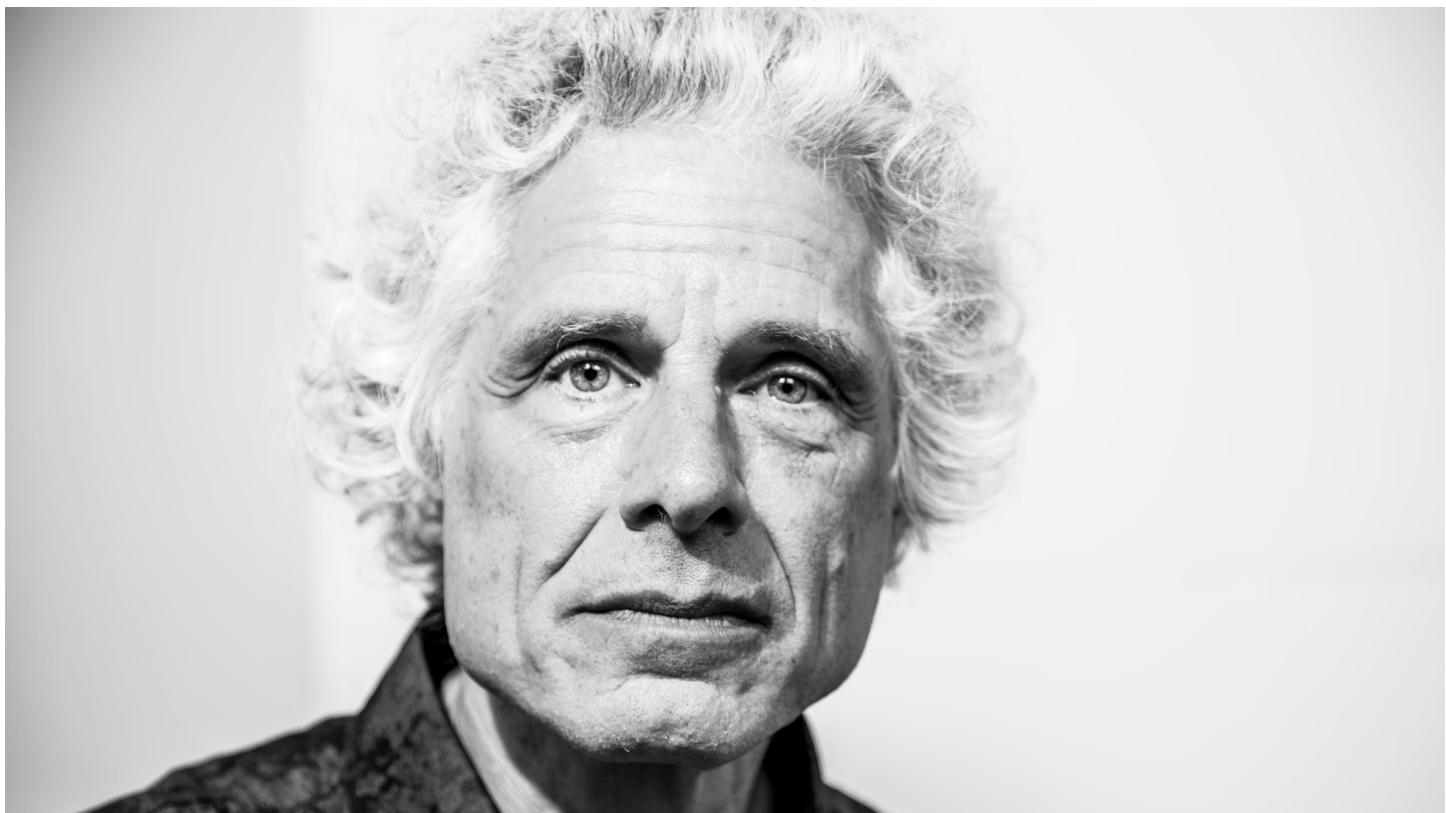


The Chilling Effect of an Attack on a Scholar

Steven Pinker will be fine, but a letter from his critics signals less powerful scholars that certain opinions, publicly stated, could result in professional sanction.

By Conor Friedersdorf



Erin Patrice O'Brien / Redux

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About the author: *Conor Friedersdorf is a staff writer at The Atlantic and the author of the Up for Debate newsletter.*

HUNDREDS OF academics in the linguistics community signed an [open letter](#) earlier this month attacking Steven Pinker, one of their field's most

prominent scholars, for six tweets and a passage from one of his best-selling books. Whatever their intentions, they were never going to succeed in intimidating the famous, tenured Harvard professor. But they did send a message to less powerful scholars that certain opinions, publicly stated, could result in professional sanction.

The chilling effect that creates, especially among linguists without tenure, wouldn't be cause for alarm if the speech in question were obviously and egregiously improper; if it consisted, for example, of racial slurs or open bigotry. But the hundreds of academics who targeted Pinker were not merely reaffirming sensible, widely agreed upon taboos. They were trying to radically narrow the bounds of acceptable speech and inquiry. A closer look at the letter lays bare the specific ideological orthodoxies and political tests that at least hundreds of linguists now feel comfortable openly imposing on their colleagues.

Eliot A. Cohen: A tale of two letters

The first thing to note is the letter's acknowledgment that the denunciation itself and its call for the Linguistic Society of America to remove Pinker from its list of "distinguished academic fellows and media experts" are not grounded in any claim about Pinker's scholarly chops. The signatories have no concern about his "academic contributions as a linguist, psychologist and cognitive scientist."

So what do they have against Pinker? Four passages convey the argument.

The first passage:

We set aside questions of Dr. Pinker's tendency to move in the proximity of what The Guardian called a revival of "scientific racism", his public support for David Brooks (who has been argued to be a

proponent of “gender essentialism”), his expert testimonial in favor of Jeffrey Epstein (which Dr. Pinker now regrets), or his dubious past stances on rape and feminism.

In the first clause of this indictment, the signatories do not accuse Pinker of “scientific racism” with the attendant obligation to substantiate the charge. They merely claim that Pinker *tends* to “move” in “the proximity” of what one newspaper “called” a revival of scientific racism. These are the same tenuous, abuse-prone, guilty-by-association tactics that the far right has used to tar academics by linking them to communism or Islamism. The letter links to a Pinker tweet that states, “The Bell Curve: I don’t agree with it on race, but public discussion of the book has been ignorant and dishonest”—in other words, a tweet that repudiates rather than validates the part of the book that critics attacked as racist—and to a 2006 article Pinker published in *The New Republic* reviewing the work of three researchers from the University of Utah who argued, per Pinker’s description of their *Journal of Biosocial Science* paper, “that Ashkenazi Jews have a genetic advantage in intelligence, and that the advantage arose from natural selection for success in middleman occupations (moneylending, selling, and estate management) during the first millennium of their existence in northern Europe, from about 800 C.E. to 1600 C.E.” Pinker reviewed evidence for and against their hypothesis at length, reached no solid conclusion of his own, highlighted the potential downsides of such research and the problems with banning it, and did all this in a context he understood as follows:

The idea of innate Jewish intelligence is certainly an improvement over the infamous alternative generalization, a worldwide Jewish conspiracy. And attention to the talents needed in the middleman niche (whether they are biological or cultural) could benefit other middleman minorities, such as Armenians, Lebanese, Ibos, and overseas Chinese and Indians, who have also been targets of vicious persecution because of their economic success. And yet the dangers are real.

This seems rather far afield and easily distinguishable from favoring a revival of

scientific racism.

The second clause, about David Brooks, is doubly remarkable: first, because the signatories imply that publicly supporting the centrist *New York Times* columnist and best-selling author is somehow beyond the pale for linguists in good standing, and second, because they conflate agreement with a newspaper column with public support for the columnist.

Next, the signatories suggest that a linguist who provides expert textual analysis of a criminal statute—which is the service Pinker provided for Epstein, apparently at the behest of Pinker’s Harvard colleague Alan Dershowitz—is thereby sullied with the crimes of the defendant. Such an attitude would, of course, interfere with the ability to mount adequate legal defenses and challenge prosecutors.

The last clause, about Pinker’s allegedly dubious stances on rape and feminism, points to the feminist Kate Manne’s critiques of the linguist’s comments on the statistical frequency of deadly hate crimes against women, an empirical question, and on whether rape is exclusively about power or partly about sex, a matter of ongoing scholarly debate.

The letter’s passage conveys these messages to linguists: avoid anything that could be seen as “moving in the proximity” of problematic beliefs, avoid tweeting links to the work of any newspaper columnist who has any problematic belief or risk being tarred with that belief, avoid giving expert analysis of language in the criminal cases if the defendant stands accused of heinous crimes, and don’t depart from feminist orthodoxies. Already, the signatories have implied a severely constrained, highly ideological view of acceptable behavior, even before their primary critique.

The second passage:

We aim to show here Dr. Pinker as a public figure has a pattern of drowning out the voices of people suffering from racist and sexist violence, in particular in the immediate aftermath of violent acts and/or protests against the systems that created them. Below, we document six relevant occasions that show how Dr. Pinker's behavior is systematically and directly at odds with the LSA's stated aims.

The “six relevant occasions” of ostensibly bad behavior include one passage from Pinker’s best-selling book *The Better Angels of Our Nature* and a handful of tweets.

In this telling, a scholar can be guilty of “drowning out the voices of people suffering from racist and sexist violence” not as a result of speaking over anyone or suppressing their speech, but merely by publishing claims of his own. What’s more, the signatories imply that scholars can transgress against professional standards if they speak *at the wrong time*, namely “in the immediate aftermath of violent acts and/or protests against the systems that created them.”

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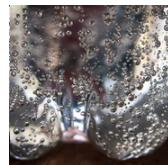
Notice, too, how this passage stereotypes “people suffering from racist and sexist violence” as if they are a monolith that shares the highly particular views of the signatories. One allegedly problematic Pinker tweet stating “Don’t abolish the police,” in fact, expresses a viewpoint that is shared by a majority of every demographic group in America. People of every race and gender subscribe to the views he has expressed—for example, that a mass shooting at UC Santa Barbara was statistically anomalous, that too many Black *and* white people are killed by police, that both over-policing and under-policing are problems.

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The third passage:

On June 3rd 2020, during historic Black Lives Matter protests in response to violent racist killings by police of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and many many others, Dr. Pinker chose to publicly co-opt the academic work of a Black social scientist to further his deflationary agenda.

The letter included a screenshot of this Pinker tweet from June:

Steven Pinker 
@sapinker · [Follow](#)

Applying the standards the signatories set forth, a linguist may violate professional standards by citing a Black academic, with the core scholarly practice of citation

selectively reframed as co-option.

The signatories go on to claim that Pinker “misrepresents” the work of that scholar. That is at least the sort of claim that ought to affect the reputation and standing of an academic, but the signatories do not substantiate it. In their telling, the social scientist in question “mainly expressed the hope he felt that the protests might spark genuine change, in keeping with his belief in the ultimate goodness of humanity.” Even if that is an accurate characterization, it does not follow that Pinker misrepresented the scholar’s work.

The fourth passage:

On June 14th 2020, Dr. Pinker uses the dogwhistle “urban crime/violence” in two public tweets (neither of his sources used the term) ... “Urban”, as a *dogwhistle*, signals covert and, crucially, **deniable** support of views that essentialize Black people as lesser-than, and, often, as criminals.

Here are Pinker’s two tweets:

Steven Pinker 
@sapinker · [Follow](#)



Don't abolish the police. Patrick Sharkey, researcher on urban violence & its decline, writes: "Cops prevent violence. But they aren't the only ones who can do it."



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Perspective | Cops prevent violence. But they aren...
Communities already know how to police their own.
Now put them in charge of it.

8:35 AM · Jun 14, 2020



174



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Another expert on urban Crime, Ron Brunson, points out: Protests focus on over-policing. But under-policing is also deadly.

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People in high-crime neighborhoods already don't trust law enforcement to protect them.

8:55 AM · Jun 14, 2020



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The notion that Pinker departed from language used by or generally associated with his sources is dishonest. Patrick Sharkey published a 2018 *New York Times* op-ed titled "Two Lessons of the Urban Crime Decline." On the cover of Sharkey's book *Uneasy Peace: The Great Crime Decline, the Renewal of City Life, and the Next War on*

Violence, the urban-studies theorist Richard Florida states, “Sharkey, the leading young scholar of urban crime and concentrated poverty, brilliantly dissects the causes of the great urban crime decline that has brought our great cities back to life, and outlines what it will take to ensure that our cities remain safe, secure, better, and more equitable places for all.”

When *The New Yorker* quoted Sharkey, it used the phrase *urban crime* too. Rod Brunson has used the term *urban crime* in his published writing. Nothing in either of Pinker’s straightforward tweets essentializes Black people or “signals” or implies that Black people are lesser than, and the phrase *urban crime* is not at all suspect when identifying scholars who specifically study and publish on *crime in cities*. As Pinker himself later observed, “Dog-whistling is an intriguing exegetical technique in which you can claim that anyone says anything, because you can easily hear the alleged dog-whistles that aren’t in the actual literal contents of what the person says.”

NO ONE ENGAGED in public life could be confident of avoiding speech that might be deemed problematic by the standards used in the Pinker letter. I have not addressed every complaint it raises. A few are in the realm of legitimate criticism. Had I edited his book *Better Angels*, I’d have advised Pinker against describing Bernie Goetz, who shot four men on the New York City subway in 1984, as “mild-mannered.” But one needn’t side with Pinker or against his detractors on every particular to disapprove of the signatories’ methods: poring over years of individual tweets, asserting uncharitable interpretations of those they highlight, assigning guilt by association, and imposing multiple orthodoxies that are incompatible with academic freedom. (They also made factual errors, as noted by Mother Jones.)

Why did hundreds of academics sign the letter and endeavor to have Pinker removed from the Linguistic Society of America's list of "distinguished academic fellows and media experts"? The explanation they offered is hard to accept. "Often, fellows are seen as the first line of academic linguistic authority, and trustworthy sources of linguistic knowledge," they wrote. "Lay people and members of the press reach out to fellows and media experts for official statements. We feel that fellows therefore have a responsibility that comes with the honor, credibility, and visibility allotted them by their distinguished appointment." But Pinker's prestige doesn't come from the list. And his visibility to members of the press and the public far exceeds that of the list.

Shaun Cammack, a graduate student at the University of Chicago, argued that, despite their stated aims, the signatories were sending a message to less powerful scholars:

This letter wasn't really about Pinker at all. In fact, it has a very specific function—to dissuade lesser-known academics and students from questioning the ideological consensus. The letter says, in not so few words: "It doesn't matter if you're Steven *f***ing* Pinker. If you don't agree with our ideological prescriptions, you don't belong here."

The letter is really directed towards *you*—the unknown academic, the young linguist, the graduate student. And in this particular goal of dissuading dissent, it will undoubtedly be successful ... You are not Steven Pinker, and Noam Chomksy and others probably aren't going to come to your defence when you get sanctioned for expressing the wrong opinion. Not because they don't believe in free speech, but because they won't even be aware of your case. There will be no articles lambasting and criticising the cancellers. Your cancellation will be a blip on the radar and the academic world will chug along without you.

Charleen Adams, a postdoctoral fellow at the Harvard School of Public Health who holds a master's degree in applied linguistics, called the letter's demands "reactive and

authoritarian,” and likened it to a performative ritual by a mob seeking purification. The Columbia University linguistics professor John McWhorter, an *Atlantic* contributor, wrote on Twitter, “An organization dedicated to linguistic analysis must punish a leading, brilliant scholar because in the wake of George Floyd's murder, his politics aren't sufficiently leftist? Folks, it's time to stand this gospel down.”

To me, the motivations behind the letter, however well-intentioned or malign, altruistic or power-seeking, quasi-religious or rational, matter less than what the attack reveals about the academy. The desire to significantly narrow the bounds of acceptable speech is not a fringe proposition; it is a project that hundreds of people in a single academic field are willing to pursue openly. While tenured professors can reject newly expansive views of verboten speech and ideas without fearing the loss of their livelihood, scholars without tenure and younger linguists applying to graduate school or working toward graduate degrees will feel most constrained.

Conor Friedersdorf is a staff writer at *The Atlantic* and the author of the [Up for Debate](#) newsletter.