



Episode 743: Has the State Reduced Violence?

Guest: Stefan Blankertz

WOODS: I wish my reading German were stronger. As I told you before we went on, I did actually study German for reading knowledge, and I even did a translation of a German text into English, so I got pretty good at it. But then I didn't do it for a long time, and I just don't think I would be prepared to read your book. So I thought I'd do the next best thing; I'll talk to you about it. You have written a reply to a professor in the US who's quite well known, and who's written a lot of things that might challenge ideas that libertarians have, and particularly completely anti-state libertarians. So tell us who Steven Pinker is and what's the primary thesis you are grappling with in your own work?

BLANKERTZ: Yes. Steven Pinker wrote this book – in English, *The Better Angels of our Nature*. In Germany it is called quite differently. If I translate it back into English, it reads, *Violence: A New History of Mankind*. And his main thesis is that violence declined from the beginning of mankind until now. And that is one thing many people will not believe, and some of his arguments, some of his data are very interesting. But the other thing, the second thesis is quite challenging for libertarians and especially for anarchocapitalists like me. He says the first step in reducing violence in human society is that the state is established, and it is not important what kind of state it is. Every state is better than anarchy. And so I must answer this, because you cannot be an anarchist if this thesis is right.

WOODS: The first thesis that you're talking about, that violence has been reduced over time, it doesn't necessarily imply the second thesis, but even if you didn't have the second thesis the first one would still be a challenge to libertarians, because we point to the 20th century and the state-induced horrors of the 20th century as evidence for our side. So if somebody comes along and says, well, in fact, if we measure violence per capita we're still doing quite well, even that is a real blow to libertarian claims. So how do you start out? What's the approach you take here?

BLANKERTZ: Pinker presents some very interesting data, but they did not fit into steady decline of violence. Against that you can say you have ups and downs in violence in society. That is the first thing which we have to say. And the second thing is that the decline of violence is not due to state intervention, and even in light of the data Pinker presents us, he often said that movements from society reduced violence against the state. For instance, liberalism in the 19th century. So he is not convincing in that it is the state which is the origin of the decline of violence. And the last thing which is very, very important is that the decline of violence is not in

itself an indicator that something is good, because if you compare, for instance, Russia and Stalin in the 1930s, then you have very high state violence, violence by the state. And in the '50s, in the early '50s, it was not the case, not because Stalin has become a kind man, but because everyone was very scared. So Steven Pinker has no understanding of consequence of people being afraid of the state. When they did not resist it seems that everything is very peaceful, but it is not. So those are the three points in this case.

WOODS: I think there's a part — at least a part of his thesis deals with going back and looking at primitive tribes, and he has some claims about primitive tribes and what life was like in these tribes. And he'll claim that these are stateless orders, and given that these yield unsatisfactory results, then the replacement of such primitive arrangements by the state is I think to his mind simply obvious to everyone as a step forward for mankind. What's the problem there? Is there a problem there?

BLANKERTZ: Yes, there is a very big problem. Because he has no definition of what anarchy is he cannot distinguish anarchist tribes from statist tribes. That is the first thing. The second thing is that he does not count that in a stateless society, of course because there is no state, some of the violence is not criminal violence, but violence to stop criminal activities. So it is not distinguished. Every person who dies violently in an anarchist tribe in his counting is the victim of murder. So this is ridiculous.

The second thing is that his data, they are not very good. Sometimes there are even very shameful facts behind them. For instance, one of the tribes he is referring to as a coup in southern Africa. And the first thing is in the time which was observed by the research was more than 20 years, and in the 20 years there have been 20 murders, as he calls it, so this does not sound like very much. But because the tribe is small, he calculated that if the tribe is as big as the United States then they have the same rate of murder. You can say that this is not very convincing, because it implies that if the tribe would grow they would murder more people. That is not very convincing. That is one thing.

The other thing is that the !Kung were under pressure from colonialism for 200 years in that time which has been observed, and that a few years before this time period which he refers to, there was a genocide from German colonialism in South Africa, and one of the things is that the state issued license to kill !Kung people. You have until 1936, I think, it was legal to hunt !Kung and under bushmen like animals, and if you don't think that such a circumstance has any influence on the structure of a society, then you just don't understand how people react to such horrors.

So this one of the stories, and every case he brings before us has such a story behind it. So this is the part on which I can be very upset, because he's so — I don't know how to call it in English. It is so sad what has been done to these people by statist societies that you can only weep, but not point the finger at them and say, okay, there have been some wrongdoings in every society. It will happen. But the moral made out of it is totally the other way around.

WOODS: I think you and I can both understand why the arguments of a guy like Pinker are widely accepted, even by people who probably haven't read his books. They seem to make sense, because it would seem that the introduction of institutions we

associate with the state, like a court system, a legal system, a consistent or at least in application of a universally known set of laws, institutionalized law enforcement. How could these things not minimize human conflict? It seems like this has to be a step forward for mankind, so why would you say it isn't?

BLANKERTZ: Yeah, the first thing is that Pinker has no understanding of how an anarchist society functions, and even these so-called primitive people, they have a very good system of laws. It totally depends on restitution. Nothing else. No punishment, only restitution. And the other thing is that it is based on property rights, so what is called an offense is someone does something to me, to my person, to my body, to my property, and then I have the right to get restitution. And this system works for hundreds and thousands of years actually until the state comes. And the first thing that the state does in the first appearance is that the state diminished property rights. We libertarians know it, that the state introduced taxes and tribute that had to be paid. And so the state lowered the rights of the people. And of course it was very, very violent in the first time of state appearance, much violence. Steven Pinker does not deny it. He calls the first states, that they operate on systems like the mafia, so he did not make it better. But he says even the mafia is better than no state. But this is not true (laughing). So his argument in this case did not lead anywhere.

WOODS: What about this objection: in the cases that we have observed over the past 100 years where a regime collapses — this has happened quite a few times in Africa, but it happened in Eastern Europe after communism, particularly in Romania, where there were shootouts in the streets at the time of the chaos when Ceaușescu was going to be executed or had been executed. The point is when we see these regimes collapse, we don't see a group of private security companies filling the void. We see people with guns in the streets and everybody's trying to see who the strongest one will be who will take over. So again, I can see a reason that somebody like Pinker would instinctively think that any state must be better than no state, because when we observe that very rare interregnum between rulers or between states or regimes, it never looks like anarchocapitalism. It just looks like a lot of violence.

BLANKERTZ: Yes. The first question: does this mean that people should not resist an unjust regime? Pinker himself calls Nelson Mandela the greatest statesman of all times. So there he refers to someone who turns over the old rule, and of course in South Africa crime rates went up, but his reaction is not the old ruler should be preserved. So this is the first thing. The second thing is that if you have the notion that in the chaotic period after a breakdown of a regime there is much violence, then we often do not count what violence has been committed by the regime before. It looks orderly. It looks like more order or less violence, but of course the regime before — you named Ceausescu — was very violent. But it is not seen in the public. That is the second thing. And the third thing is of course people will not, after 60 years of communism and 200 years of statism, they will not be able to introduce anarchocapitalism overnight. So it must be that there is a learning period, like everything else in life. It is not that you become a master overnight.

WOODS: I run into a lot of people who encounter the Pinker thesis online or in social media, and the Pinker thesis can be expressed so simply: the state has reduced violence. Whereas our response, as is often the case, takes more than one simple

third-grade-level sentence. Can you try your best to give me a good 60-second comeback that libertarians can use?

BLANKERTZ: There's a saying of a left-wing anarchist in the 19th century, and he said, "Anarchy is the highest expression of order." (laughing) So I think this is one of the possible answers. It is a thesis, as Pinker's thesis is a thesis, and of course you have to explain the thesis afterwards, but I think that the difficulty in explaining our point that people are so used to believing the statist view, that at first they think we are crazy.

WOODS: All right, how about this — here's something we get quite a bit: if anarchocapitalism is so great, how come we don't see it anywhere? Or why did the original condition that you're describing among some of these peoples, this condition that we would have to classify as statelessness, why did it not persist if it is a superior system?

BLANKERTZ: This is a very good question, and I tried to find out an answer and give an outline in my theory. So at first we have to look at how the original tribes keep their order in an anarchist way. It is that their system depends on family relations, and one of the most important rules is that you have to support those people who are most closely related to you. And because everyone in this tribe is related to everyone else in some way, some closer and others not so close, any conflicts in these societies happen between two parties who are equally strong. That is because if some party becomes weaker, then other parts of the tribe have to help the weaker part. So every conflict is a conflict between parties who are equally strong, so no party can gain power. And this is a very strong incentive to mediate conflicts via wise men or wise women, who are the judge originally. They have no power, but they give advice in conflicts. And this system worked out for several thousands of years, and in some very small societies today it is still the fact.

So this system based on family relationships collapsed when two tribes clashed. It's obvious: if two tribes have a conflict, this mechanism will not work. If we have to tribes who are nomads, the weaker part will leave the area. But if we have peasants, then they cannot leave without great difficulties. So the first states were introduced by nomads who conquered peasants. It's a little bit more complicated than this, but this will be too long to go into the details. But this is mostly the case. And after the a nomad tribe conquered the peasants, they instituted all of the things we know of as taxation, as armies, and so on. And this is very successful, not in the short run. The state needed several thousands of years to conquer all the world, but of course the state was able to collect much power, and there has been no way found out by the people to contradict it.

But we now are in the good situation that we have capitalism, and capitalism is the possibility to reenact original anarchy on a higher level, because we have the idea that we can have protection agencies, private protection agencies with no central power. And then we have again the same situation as in the original anarchy that the conflicts between these private non-monopolized agencies would tend to a situation in which mediation is better and more at hand than doing the conflicts in a violent way.

WOODS: Can you tell me the name of your book on this subject in German and what it would be in English?

BLANKERTZ: Yes. It is called in German *Widerstand*. This means "Resistance." And the subtitle is *Aus den Akten Pinker vs. Anarchy*: "From the Files of Pinker vs. Anarchy."

WOODS: Okay, so I've actually got the Amazon Germany page for that book, and I'm linking to it, because I know — *I know* I've got some German speakers. I have 140 countries worth of people listening to the show. I know I've got some German speakers out there. So I'm actually going to link to your book at TomWoods.com/743.

BLANKERTZ: Thank you.

WOODS: It should be read.

BLANKERTZ: You can have it also through Amazon USA, because it's a book on demand, and it should be available in the US and Canada and Australia, I think.

WOODS: Ah, all right, well, hold on a minute. We're going to test that theory right now with you sitting right here with me. If only I knew the — oh, hey, you do have some books here in the US version. Have you written more — wow, you've written a bunch.

BLANKERTZ: Yes.

WOODS: Oh, and there it is. Okay, so I'm going to link to the US version, because that'd be more convenient for I think most people. Well, how about that? There it is. All right, so TomWoods.com/743 is where people can find out about that. Well, I hope people do check it out. Even though it's going to be linked on the American Amazon page, it's still in German, but as I say, I know we've got some German speakers who should be reading this, and I'm glad to hear about the work you're doing, and I'm sorry I wasn't aware of it. Get some of it translated to English so a dope like me can read it. (laughing) Then it'll be a lot easier on us. Well, thanks so much for your time and for your hard work on this, because this is I think one of the biggest scholarly challenges our ideas have faced, and for you to take it head-on is a great service to everyone, so thank you.

BLANKERTZ: Yeah, thank you for inviting me to your show. I have listened to some of your podcasts, so I'm very impressed by your work and how you are able to put things very consistently on the one hand, and on the other hand I think in a popular way, and this is very, very hard work. I know that.

WOODS: Well, I appreciate that. That's very much what I'm striving to do. Well, thanks again for your time. Much appreciated.

BLANKERTZ: Yes, thank you.