

Steven Pinker's remarks on a panel, 11/6/2017, Harvard University

A transcription of <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTiRnbNT5uE>

“The other way in which I do agree with my fellow panelists that political correctness has done an enormous amount of harm in the sliver of the population that might be ... I wouldn't want to say persuadable, but certainly whose affiliation might be up for grabs... comes from the often highly literate, highly intelligent people who gravitate to the alt-right. Internet savvy, media savvy, who often are radicalized in that way — who swallow the red pill, as the saying goes, the allusion from The Matrix.

When they are exposed the first time to true statements that have never been voiced in college campuses, or in The New York Times, or in respectable media, they are almost like a bacillus to which they have no immunity. And they're immediately infected with both the feeling of outrage that these truths are unsayable, and no defense against taking them to what we might consider to be rather repellent conclusions.

Let me give you some examples. Here is a fact that's going to sound ragingly controversial but is not, and that is that capitalist societies are better than communist ones. If you doubt it, then just ask yourself the question, would I rather live in South Korea or North Korea? Would I rather live in West Germany in the 1970s or East Germany or in the 1960s? I submit that this is actually not a controversial statement — but in university campuses, it would be considered flamingly radical.

Here's another one: Men and women are not identical in their life priorities, in their sexuality, in their tastes and interests. Again, this is not controversial to anyone who has even glanced at the data. The kind of vocational interest tests of the kind that your high school guidance counselor gave you were given to millions of people. And men and women give different answers as to what they want to do for a living, and how much time they want to allocate to family versus career, and so on. But you can't say it. I mean, someone, a very famous person on this campus did say it and we all know what happened to him. He's no longer ... Well, he is on this campus but no longer in the same office.

Here's a third fact that is just not controversial, although it sounds controversial, and that is that different ethnic groups commit violent crimes at different rates. You can go to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Look it up on their website. The homicide rate among African Americans is about seven or eight times higher than it is among European Americans. Terrorism. Go to the Global Terrorism

Database, and you find that worldwide, the overwhelming majority of suicide terrorist acts are committed by Islamist extremist groups.

Now, if you've never heard these facts before and you stumble across them, or someone mentions them, it is possible to come to some extreme conclusions. Such as that women are inferior, that African Americans are naturally violent. That we all ought to be anarcho-capitalists and do away with all regulation and social safety nets. That most terrorism in this country is the fault of Muslims.

Now, these are unwarranted conclusions. Because for each one of these facts, there are very powerful counterarguments for why they don't license racism and sexism and anarcho-capitalism and so on.

The fact that men and women aren't identical has no implications for whether we should discriminate against women, for a number of reasons. One of them is: for any traits in which the sex is different, two distributions have enormous amounts of overlap, so that you can't draw a reliable conclusion about any individual from group averages.

Number two, the principle of opposition to racism and sexism is not a factual claim that the sexes and races are indistinguishable in every aspect. It's a political and moral commitment to treat people as individuals, as opposed to pre-judging them by the statistics of their group. Third, we know that some of the statistical generalizations about races and sexes change over time, so what is true now may not necessarily be true in 10 or 20 years.

These are all reasons why you can believe that the sexes are different, and be a very strong feminist; why you can believe that differences between the races exist, and be very strongly opposed to any form of racism.

In the case of, say, rates of violent crime, it used to be — go back 100 years, the rate of violent crime among Irish Americans was far higher than among other ethnic groups. That obviously changed. There's no reason that that can't change in the case of current racial differences. In the case of terrorism, the majority of domestic terrorism is committed by right-wing extremist groups, not by Islamic groups within this country. Of course, through much of its history, Islam was far more enlightened than Christendom. There was no equivalent of the Inquisition. There was no equivalent of the wars of religion in the classical history of Islam.

Finally, in the case of the fact that capitalism is really a better system than Marxism — every successful capitalist society has regulation, has a social safety net. And in fact, some of the countries with the strongest social safety nets are

also the countries that are most market-friendly, that have the greatest degree of economic freedom.

These are all reasons why you can believe all of these and not necessarily drift toward extremist positions — in fact, why you can be a progressive, a centrist, a liberal, even a leftist, and believe all of these. Because you're exposed not only to the facts, but how to put them in context.

Now, let's say that you have never even heard anyone mention these facts. The first time you hear them, you're apt to say — number one, the truth has been withheld from me by universities, by mainstream media. And moreover, you will be vindicated when people who voice these truths are suppressed, shut down, assaulted... all the more reason to believe that the left, that the mainstream media, that universities can't handle the truth. So you get vindicated over and over again.

But worst of all, you're never exposed to the ways of putting these facts into context so that they don't lead to racism and sexism and extreme forms of anarcho-libertarianism.

The politically correct left is doing itself an enormous disservice when it renders certain topics undiscussable, especially when the facts are clearly behind them. Because they leave people defenseless, the first time they hear them, against the most extreme and indefensible conclusions possible. If they were exposed, then the rationale for putting them into proper political and moral context could also be articulated, and I don't think you would have quite the extreme backlash.”