

Bregman, Rutger: Humankind – A Hopeful History (Bloomsbury, pp. 494)

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About Rutger Bergman

Rutger Bergman is one of Europe's most prominent young historians. His previous book, *Utopia for Realists*, was on the bestseller list of *Sunday Times* and *New York Times* and has been translated from the Dutch language into more than thirty languages.

Bergman was nominated twice for the prestigious European Press Prize for his work at *De Correspondent*; his writing has been featured in the *Washington Post* and the *Guardian*. His Ted talk "Poverty isn't a lack of character, it's a lack of cash", has been viewed over three million times. He is ranked among the top ten in *Big Issue's Top 100 Change Makers of 2020*.

In 2019, Bergman went viral after calling out **tax-shy billionaires** at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

The Review

Rutger Bergman, without being unduly naive, makes a very powerful declaration of faith in the innate goodness and natural decency of human beings. He sets out to make a robust and convincing case for believing – despite plenty of evidence to the contrary, that we are not the savage, greedy, violent and rapacious species we have been led into thinking ourselves to be. As he says in his recent interview with Andrew Yang that in the past 15 to 20 years, we are moving from a cynical view of human nature to a more hopeful view.

Humankind makes a bold and sweeping argument to make us rethink what we believe about society, democracy and human nature. The book provides the historical and philosophical foundation to make us confident enough to collaborate, be kind and trust each other to build a better society. It is an uplifting book and will change the way we see the world.

The book begins with the quote:

'Man will become better when you show him what he is like.'

- Anton Chekhov (1860 – 1904)

The author relies on the 18th century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau to support his view that humans are by nature nice and it is the institutions of civilization that have corrupted humankind. Bregman contrasts this with the

'veneer theory' as detailed by the biologist Frans de Waal, and attributed to the Englishman Thomas Hobbes, whose *Leviathan* published in 1651, puts forth the view that civilization is a thin skin of decency, barely concealing the savage ape hidden underneath.

One tends to think that there is something to be said for both the views simultaneously, but *Humankind* sets out to override our so called preconceived ideas with the help of select study citations and scenes from the London blitz during the Second World War and other similar teachable stories. 'The veneer theory', is totally wrong according to Bregman.

His evidence is based upon studies which suggest that infants and toddlers have a natural bias towards fairness and cooperation. When some Tongan children were accidentally shipwrecked on a Pacific island for nearly fifteen months, they chose to cooperate generously rather than re-enact the fictional *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. In that spectacularly popular book, a group of kids, landing up in an uninhabited island after a plane crash, slowly forget their good behaviour and turn into savages. In the First World War, German and British soldiers are alleged to have played football on the Christmas day.

Rather than such heart-warming anecdotes, one needs some evolutionary evidence. For instance, one can ask, 'why did early humans survive, while their contemporaries, the Neanderthals did not?' Veneer theorist's natural suspicion is that humans killed them all. But according to Bregman, 'the more plausible theory is that we humans were better able to cope with the last ice age, because we had developed the ability to work together. He elaborates on his theory in his interview, "What makes us so successful, we build pyramids and spaceships, is our capacity for friendships. We are not strong or smart, but we can collaborate on a scale that other animals cannot." But as per that author himself, a few pages earlier, the Neanderthals worked together too. They built fires, cooked food, made clothing, musical instruments, and jewellery and made cave paintings. So Bregman's explanation does not sound plausible.

Such inconsistencies are found throughout the book, particularly in its argument that the great tragedy of human history was the invention of agriculture and cities, about

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10,000 years ago. That brought about the drudgery of work and the rise of political leaders and most of all war. Till then as per the rosy picture painted by the author, we were all happy and peaceful hunter gatherers; greeting strangers in a civil manner. This particularly is hard to believe, when there is evidence to the contrary, with at least one modern hunter - gatherer society, the !kung people, who were found to be very violent, particularly towards strangers. Bregman seems to wilfully paint an Edenic view of prehistoric society.

Bregman makes an a priori assumption that all nasty stories about human nature must be 'myths'. So he casually brushes aside Philip Zimbardo's Stanford Prison experiment, as a hoax. He also attempts to disprove that accepted version of how deforestation led to civil war, cannibalism, and population collapse in a bizarre chapter about Easter Island attempts, even though Eastern Islanders themselves put forth the contrary version. He thus casually dismisses inconvenient evidence.

Bregman's approach is contradictory to Stanley Milgram's 'obedience' experiments, in which subjects were instructed to give (fake) electric shocks to persons in another room by experimenters. The subjects continued to give the electric shocks, even when the 'victims' seemed to be in terrible pain. These findings have been robustly repeated and Bregman is forced to admit that he is not able to contradict this story. What he does is he reframes the subjects' obedience as 'conformity', which does not wash down well with the readers. Bregman's explanation for the Holocaust is our social instinct to conform, along with the acknowledged camaraderie between soldiers rather than any assumption of fundamental human evil. This fails notably to explain the actions of Nazi leaders.

Bregman also wants to reshape society, with widespread hyper - local participatory democracy, with many more people attending endless town hall meetings. He cites the book, 'Against Elections: The case for Democracy' by David Van Ray Brouch and paints an Utopian picture of a genuine democracy based on the ancient model of Greeks. In this he seems to ignore the fact that the political nerds who advocate such arrangements might be terribly over estimating the general public's eagerness and appetite for political participation. He overlooks the basic premise of modern liberal democracy, wherein citizens pay a professional political class, so that they do not have to be bothered about politics, much of the time.

Bregman is very appreciative of the niceness of Norwegian prisons, with the humane treatment of prisoners. The inmates have the freedom to socialise with the guards and can even have their own music studios to make music. The result is that Norway has the lowest amount of recidivism in the whole world, lowest chance that the inmate will commit a crime again. He also points out that due to the

humane treatment meted out to the prisoners in Norway, the chance that someone will get a job after going to prison goes up by 40 percent; whereas in US, it is quite the opposite. Bergman also visits a hippyish school, without any set lessons or curriculum. He suggests things could be like this everywhere, if we believe in human decency.

Bregman's attempt throughout the book is to replace a story about humans' basic wickedness with a contrasting story about human's essential loveliness. But this attempt fails considerably, since any claim that complex human beings are essentially one single thing or another only ends up as a fairy tale. He does acknowledge in his interview with Andrew Yang, "I wouldn't say people are naturally good; we are not angels. We are capable of lots of nasty stuff, we are jealous and aggressive, but we have evolved to work with each other." Bregman argues that humans have evolved to be fundamentally social creatures, and makes a big do as if this is a brave new thing to argue, ignoring the fact that almost none in the world really disagrees with that, "but sometimes our sociability is the problem". Does he consider gun - trotting anti -lockdown protestors in the US as sociable? What about criminal gangs and far-right activists? So, it boils down to being anti-social is the problem, which is an over simplification, because things are more complicated than what books such as Bregman's allow.

Bregman himself unwittingly provides an illustration of this, quoting the incident of the director of the hippy schools, parking his care flagrantly across the bike path, thus restricting the freedom of any cyclist who had to navigate around this non conformist's vehicle and who would definitely not be inclined to agree that people are fundamentally good-hearted.

Bregman is very proud of his new realism, and his radical idea which according to him is known to make rulers nervous and denied by religions and ideologies, ignored by news media and in fact erased from the annals of human history.

The idea according to him is very much intrinsic to human nature legitimized by every branch of science corroborated by evolution and confirmed by everyday life.

The idea that might start a revolution and would change our world view is that most people, deep down, are pretty decent.

As Peter, who rescued the children in Tonga would say in his memories:

"Life has taught me a great dealincluding the lesson that you should always look for what is good and positive in people."

Bregman in a recent interview with Bright Spot Series has further said, "My hope is that the Corona crisis will bring us

into a new age of cooperation and solidarity and a realization that we are in this together.”

“As we are living through a pandemic, we realize that ...we need cooperation on a huge scale, on a global scale. So my hope is that this crisis can help bring the neo liberal age to a definite end, so that we can move into a new realist age, where we have a new view of human nature and do not look at human beings as fundamentally selfish any more, but as pretty decent.” Bregman's basic view point is that in creating the knowledge economy, we have made simple things more complex, but is all that complexity really needed? A notable example is the healthcare system, which has been made so complex. His

basic philosophy is going back to basics: 'To make it difficult is simple; but to make it simple is difficult!'

References

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3. Rey Brouch; Against Elections: The Case for Democracy, Random House, UK, pp 208