REVIEW

‘Actually, we’re quite good!’: Rutger Bregman’s new realism

Rutger Bregman, *Humankind: A Hopeful History*, Bloomsbury, London, 2020, 496pp, ISBN (hardback) 978-1408898932, price £20; 9781408898963 (ebook), price £14 (paperback also available)

Reviewed by Sven Saar

Rutger Bregman’s new book *Humankind* could be a game changer: it takes on the pessimistic world view that the more we know about the human being, the more reasons we find to despair, and challenges its many empirical and academic foundations.

When William Golding published *Lord of the Flies* in 1954, it resonated with the post-Holocaust collective consciousness to such an extent that one essential attribute was overlooked: it is a work of fiction. Left to themselves, and in the absence of a benign, controlling authority, would human beings really become vicious, cruel bullies – or their helpless victims?

Although a historian, Bregman pursues this question in the best journalistic tradition, and investigates: Was there ever a situation where this really happened? And if ‘yes’, did people behave as Golding suggests? In a fascinating, stand-alone chapter he discovers that there was – and they didn’t. A group of public school boys from Tonga, on an ill-advised escape attempt in the Southern Pacific, became stranded on a desert island and co-operated pretty harmoniously all the time up to their rescue a year later, working in teams of two to provide food and shelter, organising daily routines, keeping the fire going and settling disputes by collectively intervening in small-scale quarrels. When they were discovered in September 1966, they were in good mental and physical condition. Their experience set them up to remain life-long friends, and Bregman managed to track down and interview both a castaway and the Australian captain who came across the island.

Could it be that Richard Dawkins has it wrong when he identifies the human being as essentially and irrevocably egotistical in *The Selfish Gene*, a book Bregman calls ‘a depressing read’, but which the British public voted the most influential science book ever written (The *Guardian*, 20 July 2017)?

With refreshing and irreverent energy, Bregman investigates and deconstructs the argument that we are selfish by nature. Taking the Hobbes–Rousseau polarity as his starting point, he asks whether biology, anthropology and history really support the argument for a strong, controlling authority that has informed societies the world over for thousands of years, long before it was given philosophical credence in Hobbes’ *Leviathan* in 1651.

Looking afresh at empirical evidence from ancient cultures, such as the collapse of the Easter Island civilisation, and at behaviourist experiments conducted by both zoologists and psychologists in the post-war years, Bregman gradually develops a simple but potentially all-changing theory: that the human being evolved as the world’s dominant species not because we were the strongest, but because we were the *nicest*. Reading this book, you come across such

deliberate stylistic sins against academic convention on a regular basis. There is thorough, well-documented research and comparison of essential literature, yet throughout it is leavened by a journalistic, contemporary tone which had me turning the pages ('OK, one more chapter'…) in a way I rarely do with non-fiction.

When he reveals that the Neanderthals were not only stronger but had considerably larger brains than *homo sapiens* and should, according to Darwinist theory, have won the human race, he draws this analogy: 'If Neanderthals were a super-fast computer, we were an old-fashioned PC – *with wi-fi*! We were slower, but better connected.' (original italics)

Bregman shows that we are the only species that *blushes*, and takes this as yet more evidence that we are genetically disposed to be social, to care what others think of us and behave accordingly. This, not our adaptability to harsh environmental conditions, he sees as the secret to evolutionary success. He argues that ancient hunter-gatherer cultures knew no all-out war: a 'snuggle' rather than a 'struggle' for survival characterised their strategy during the long ice age period. Also, their nomadic habits made it easy to avoid conflict: while there are plenty of cave paintings showing hunting scenes, there are none older than 10,000 years which depict fights among humans. These begin to appear when humans settle and turn to farming rather than hunting. Far from seeing this as the great leap forward, Bregman, like Rousseau, regards this period as the moment where it all went wrong. One hundred years after Hobbes, Rousseau wrote: 'The first man who, after enclosing a piece of ground, took it into his head to say "This is mine", and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society.' This, he continues, made him responsible for 'how many crimes, how many wars, how many murders, how many misfortunes and horrors…'.

After demolishing the case for pessimism, Bregman goes on to show the justification for a more positive view he has the audacity to call 'realistic'. Soldiers in a number of battles secretly refused to fire their weapons; companies and enterprises are run successfully and profitably by their employees without the need for management; criminals and terrorists are reformed by acts of generosity and kindness. Halden, one of the most successful (maximum security) prisons in the world in Norway, has neither cells, bars nor armed guards. Here, correction of selfish, antisocial tendencies is not about preventing bad behaviour but preventing bad intentions.

The most profound gift in Bregman's book is that it offers hope based on facts: here is no blue-eyed idealist telling us how we could be, but a self-confessed realist asking us to be true to what we are. The book's opening quotation by Chekov says it all: 'Man will become better when you show him what he is like.'

Sven Saar is a Free Range Waldorf Teacher; contact: sven.saar@aswte.org.uk.

SOME HUMANISTIC WISDOM

"When I look at the world I'm pessimistic, but when I look at people I am optimistic."

Carl R. Rogers (1902–1987)