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'Human beings have evolved to be friendly'

Historian Rutger Bregman on panic buying, penguins, Norwegian prisons and what really matters in today's world

In his new book 'Humankind – A Hopeful History' Rutger Bregman takes the latest from science – from anthropology to sociology, from archaeology to economics – to show that human beings are naturally kind and what we should infer from that.

In your book you claim that in catastrophes people don't panic, they support each other. Have you tried to buy toilet paper during the last days?

Sure, there are examples of what you could call selfish behaviour right now. However, the vast majority of the behaviour we're currently seeing is actually kind. You see all kinds of initiatives from the bottom up which are about helping each other.

When it comes to panic buying, it's simple capitalist entrepreneurial theory of how supermarkets work. This is just in time delivery, so if there is 20, 30 or maybe 40 per cent more demand, then all the shelves are empty. I think we shouldn't overemphasise that. There's a lot of that in the news right now, but actually what is happening right now is the same what you see during other crises, like natural disasters. It's that most behaviour is actually pro-social in nature.

In one chapter of your book you mention the Holocaust. If humans are naturally good, why are they acting in horrible ways?

Obviously, this is one of the big questions of history. One of the main points of my book is that human beings have evolved to be friendly. Biologists have found out that over the course of human evolution it was actually the friendliest among us who had the most kids and had the biggest chance of passing on their genes to the next generation. This is literally what they call "survival of the friendliest".

But if I discard the old idea that people are fundamentally selfish or aggressive, then how can we explain the darkest pages of our history? Wars, genocides, ethnic cleansing.

I do not have the pretence that I can give a short answer to that question. In the book, I go on about it for hundreds of pages. There's a dark side to friendliness as well. You can call it groupish or tribal behaviour. We want to be part of a group and find it hard to go against that group; and that sometimes in those group dynamics, we can start doing horrible things in the name of loyalty, friendship and comradeship.

How can we overcome dynamics of group identity?

It's relatively easy to assume the best in people who are close to you. Friends, colleagues, family members. It becomes more difficult for us when we talk about people who are far away, about criminals or terrorists, about immigrants or refugees. For us, these people are more abstract. I devote quite a big part of the book to making the conclusion that we need to use our rationality here and go against our intuition, to assume the best also in those who are far away from us.

For example, prisons in Norway are organised in a very counter-intuitive way. Their inmates, who have done quite horrible stuff sometimes – murders, rapes – still get the freedom to go to the cinema. There's a library in the prison, they can make their own music. It seems very counter-intuitive, but then you look at the scientific data, how these prisons are performing, and you realise these are the best prisons in the world because they have the lowest recidivism rate – the lowest chance that someone who's gone to prison and gets out will commit another crime. It doesn't really matter if you're left-wing or right-wing or whatever your worldview is. The data tells us that this is the most effective prison.

It becomes more difficult to assume the best in people who are farther away from us, but that's also where it becomes really important to do so.

One sentence in the book which struck me is "empathy and xenophobia are two sides of the same coin". Pardon, what?

Empathy we know, according to recent psychological research, works as a spotlight. It lets you focus on a specific person, a specific victim or a specific group that you really care for. And the rest of the world becomes a little bit blurry.

How does empathy work in practice? The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is probably a good example. Let's say, the Palestinians commit an

attack, the Israelis feel a lot of empathy for their victims, and so they become angry and they want revenge. They commit another attack, and then it's the Palestinians who have empathy for their own group. And it goes on and on like that.

If you look at the history of the Middle East in the past couple of decades, you come to the conclusion that there's actually been too much empathy which has fuelled a lot of hatred and violence. We need to use our rationality to realise that, actually, in the end, we're all human beings and we all have our rights and our desires. I think that is sometimes a process that goes against our intuition, but in the long run, will help bring us together.

You state that most people have a negative image of man. In your opinion this is not true, but it works as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Can you explain what you mean?

I think that what you assume in other people is what you get out of them. If you assume that most people are selfish or even evil, then you start designing your institutions around that idea, you start organising your schools in that way. You build democracy as well as the workplace and your prisons around the idea of competition.

In this way, you start creating the kind of people that your theory presupposes. Now, if you turn it around, if you assume that most people are pretty decent, then you can organise your institutions in a totally different way. You can give kids the freedom to follow their own learning path. You can organise the workplace in a much less hierarchical way. You can get rid of a lot of managers.

Your democracy can be very different, as well. You don't need this strong hierarchy where those in power control the rest of the population, but you can rely on average citizens who have often much more to say. I think those kind of institutions will also create the kind of people that these institutions need, because what you assume in other people is what you get out of them.

Conservatives would say that's pretty naïve and unrealistic. In your book you actually call for a new realism. In your view, how does it look like?

If there's one central dogma of conservatives, it is that human nature is full of evil and selfishness. The problem is that theory is just wrong. For a long time, we thought that when someone was drowning, or someone was attacked in the street, most people would just do nothing, what they called the bystander effect. In reality, we now know that 90% of all people actually help.

The latest scientific evidence shows: There's a deep inclination in our nature towards kindness, towards altruism. We actually want to help, we want to feel friendship, loyalty and comradeship. Those intuitions are very powerful within us and I think we should recognise that and design our institutions around it.

I'm not saying that people are angels, we're certainly not. We are capable of all kinds of horrible things. In reality, we're not only the friendliest species, but we're also, in some circumstances, the cruellest species in the animal kingdom. We're capable of horrific things that a penguin, for example, would never do. I've never heard of a penguin who locks up other groups of penguins and exterminates them. These are singularly human crimes. But again, what you assume in people is what you get out of them. This cynical worldview that they've called the realistic worldview has done a huge amount of harm in our societies.

According to you, we live in the richest, safest, and healthiest era of all time. However, people have often the perception that the world is getting worse when actually, there is less hunger and poverty and there are less victims of wars. You partly blame the media for this. Should we stop following the news?

I certainly think it wouldn't be a bad idea to more or less stop following the news, but I do have to point out there's an important distinction to be made between the news and journalism. Good journalism helps us to look at the bigger picture, and to understand the structural forces that govern our societies and our lives. Another crucial finding from psychology is that power corrupts. Journalism is incredibly important to control those in power and keep them in check.

But the news, which is mostly reporting on incidental, sensational and negative topics, often don't really help you to better understand the world. There's actually quite a lot of evidence that shows that it can actually be damaging for your mental health.

Psychologists talk about the mean world syndrome. People who watch too much news think that most other people that they haven't met are selfish or mean, which isn't the case.

You are a huge critic of inequality. "Taxes, taxes, taxes" went around the world. How can we achieve a more equal society? Aren't the forces who oppose higher taxes too strong?

They're certainly strong, but we're currently living through a change in the zeitgeist. I grew up in the 70s and 80s when the neoliberal era started. The central dogma of that time was most people are selfish,

and again we started designing our institutions around it and the result was increased inequality, anxiety, loneliness. I think that you could argue that the financial crash of 2008 was a result of that, maybe even Brexit and the election of Donald Trump.

In the past couple of years, things have been shifting quite a bit. Some of the ideas that were just five or ten years ago unthinkable are being discussed right now. In my previous book, I talk about the idea of universal basic income to completely eradicate poverty and now even the Trump administration is giving free money to everyone during the corona crisis. Sometimes I really have to pinch myself. I'm thinking is this a dream or what's going on here?

The same with climate change. Five, ten years ago, the issue was much less urgent to people. Now, the European Commission presented their "European Green Deal". It's probably not enough, but if you compare it to where we were five years ago, it's like a century of progress in that respect.

Maybe we can now move into a new age, where we rediscover that actually, we're dependent on one another. This could be the neorealist age instead of the neoliberal age, where we also have a more hopeful and more realistic view of human nature in line with the latest scientific evidence.

Last year, you tweeted *"This whole debate about capitalism vs. socialism, competition vs. equality, etc. is so boring. You can strive for all of it, it's called Social Democracy."* You mentioned universal health care and high-quality public education as successful social-democratic policies. Why is social democracy in such a bad state?

Maybe because Social Democrats have stopped believing in social democracy for a while, but they're rediscovering now that it's actually a quite powerful idea. I made that Twitter remark in the context of the US election when everyone was talking about communism versus capitalism.

Bernie Sanders will probably lose the Democratic nomination, but he has won the battle of ideas. If you look at Joe Biden's climate plan now, it's more radical than Bernie Sanders' climate plan of 2016. If you look at the tax plans of people like Pete Buttigieg and Joe Biden, it comes pretty close to what Bernie Sanders himself proposed in 2016. Bernie Sanders is pushing at the boundaries to try and make the unthinkable become thinkable so that after that it can actually become policy.

Just ten years ago, the whole idea that Bernie Sanders – this crazy Communist – would even be seen as a serious candidate, people

would have laughed at you when you have predicted that. The centre has shifted a lot in the right direction, and Bernie Sanders played a big role in that.

What about Europe?

After the fall of the Berlin Wall there was this idea that we had arrived at the end of history. We had this neoliberal capitalist framework and that was just it. Social Democrats basically abolished themselves in many countries. This happened in the Netherlands, in Germany and in many other places.

Then came the big shock of the financial crash in 2008. Only after that, we started developing new ideas. I'm part of a very different generation, For me, the standard neoliberal framework is not a given anymore. I didn't study economics in the 80s or the 90s. I don't really believe that crap anymore.

We need social democracy. The biggest challenge is that we need to start believing in our own ideas again. From a European perspective, universal health care is very popular and works really well. We're realising right now in the corona crisis, what the really crucial professions are. All the bankers and managers can go on strike, but those in healthcare can't. A lot of parents are discovering now how difficult it is to actually teach your kids. The long-term implications are going to be fascinating because so many people are realising right now what the really crucial professions are. Maybe we should recognise them and pay them a little bit more.

This interview was conducted by Nikolaos Gavalakis.



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