

Review
Rutger Bregman:
Humankind: A hopeful history
Elizabeth Manton and Erica Moore (trans.)
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Reviewed by Michiel Horn



Soon after the attack on the Twin Towers and other targets on September 11, 2001, a complete shutdown of air traffic over North America began. Hundreds of flights were cancelled or diverted. Gander, Newfoundland, became the halting place for 38 flights, and 6,700 passengers and crew became involuntary visitors to the small town. They numbered more than half the total population of Gander, but its people famously rallied round to feed and accommodate the strangers who had landed among them. The heartening experience became the inspiration for a 2012 musical, *Come from Away*, by Irene Sankoff and David Hein, which has been a great success all over Canada and the United States. (Having seen it, I strongly recommend it.)

It is strange that the Gander experience has not made it into *Humankind: A hopeful history*, for it is precisely the sort of feel-good story the reader tends to find in its pages. Its author, Rutger Bregman (b. 1988) is a young man in a hurry. Having taken an M.A. in history, he chose to become a journalist and public intellectual and has already made a name for himself. He is probably best-known for his 2017 book *Utopia for realists (Gratis geld voor iedereen, 2014)*, which proposes a Universal Basic Income, a 15-hour working week and open borders as the conditions for a better world. In addition, his appearance at Davos in January 2019, when he identified tax avoidance by the super-rich as a central problem, and his February 2019 clash with Tucker Carlson of Fox News (Carlson suffered a meltdown) certainly made waves. His latest book, now available in a fine translation by Elizabeth Manton and Erica Moore that accurately captures the breezy and engaging informality of the Dutch original (*De meeste mensen deugen, 2019*), seeks to demonstrate his belief that most people are basically good. They will, Bregman asserts, care for and look after the interests of others, even in times of crisis. He rejects what he sees as the opposing belief, namely that human beings are basically selfish and that looking after number one is our default mode.

Right at the outset Bregman overstates his case. His “radical idea” has been “denied by religions and ideologies, ignored by the news media and erased from the annals of world history” (2), he claims, and this although it is “legitimised by virtually every branch of science, ... corroborated by evolution and confirmed by everyday life” (2). What is this radical but overlooked idea? “That most people, deep down, are pretty decent” (2). This is radical? In some circles, perhaps. Has it been overlooked? Hardly. It has been a staple of meliorist thinking for at least a couple of centuries.

Bregman shows how his idea operates in many circumstances, and states that it can be captured in “ten rules to live by” (379). These conclude the book, and they generally make good sense. I suspect, however, that Bregman could have penned the rules without preceding them with almost four hundred pages of argument and anecdote, especially because they do not always demonstrate the

points he is trying to make or do so in a way that is easily challenged, such as his fanciful account of the fate of Easter Island. His persistent thesis is that people, left to their own devices, will do good. They can do evil, but not with any ease: "...If you push people hard enough, if you poke and prod, bait and manipulate, many of us are indeed capable of doing evil. ... But evil doesn't just live just below the surface; it takes immense effort to draw it out. And most importantly, evil has to be disguised as doing good" (170). To Bregman this helps to explain such enormities as the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide and, at a more modest level, the findings of the notorious Milgram experiment. Those who participated in these events were conformists who thought they were doing the right thing.

This strikes me as both facile and jejune. The centrally important argument between Daniel Goldhagen and Christopher Browning about German behaviour during the Holocaust is absent from *Humankind*. Indeed, there is no systematic discussion of the nature of good and evil and the actions prompted by them, or any analysis of the principles of ethics and the good life. Bregman may think this unnecessary: he knows what he likes, altruism and cooperation, for instance, and he is willing to take Jean-Jacques Rousseau's word about the origins of what he doesn't like: agriculture, urbanization, social and economic inequality, state oppression. But is this more than a statement of Bregman's personal preferences and dislikes? I much prefer his point of view to Ayn Rand's, for example, but should he ignore, as he does, her influential assertion that altruism harms humanity?

A famous line from Goethe's (1808) *Faust* captures a balanced assessment of humankind: "*Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach! in meiner Brust ...* ('Two souls, alas, are housed within my breast') (Part 1, 1112). Bregman acknowledges that humans are complex creatures, with a good side and a bad side. We are capable of both altruism and egoism. The question, for us as for Faust, is which side we turn to. Here the concept of nudging, as proposed by the legal philosopher Cass R. Sunstein – he is not mentioned in *Humankind* – would have been helpful to Bregman. Regulations and policies that promote, but do not compel, socially desirable behaviour can encourage humans to make more good and fewer bad decisions. Will this produce utopia? Very probably not. Of course, there is no broad agreement as to what utopia should look like.

Humankind is not the major contribution to thought and policy-framing that Bregman seems to believe it is. However, it is worth reading, and if the author's reach has exceeded his grasp, if human beings are not as good as he believes they are, if the future does not look as bright as in his Panglossian vision: what of it? It is churlish to speak ill of those who would think well of us, who in any case think better of us than we believe ourselves to be.

Reference

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang, von. 1808. *Faust*. Tübingen: Cotta.

About the reviewer

Professor Emeritus of History Michiel Horn was born in the Netherlands and came to Canada with his family in 1952. He studied at Victoria College (University of British Columbia, B.A.), Freiburg University in Germany, and the University of Toronto, where he earned a Ph.D. in history. He taught for many years in Glendon College of York University (Toronto, Canada). His books include *The dirty thirties: Canadians in the Great Depression* (Copp Clark Publishing, 1972), *The League for Social Reconstruction* (University of Toronto Press, 1980), *A Liberation album: Canadians in the Netherlands, 1944-1945* (with David Kaufman) (McGraw Hill, 1980), *Academic freedom in Canada: A history* (University of Toronto Press, 1999), and *York University: The way must be tried* (McGill-Queens University Press, 2010). During the last twenty years he has become a literary translator. Among his translations are *Philosophy for a better world (Filosofie voor een betere wereld, 2009)* by Floris van den Berg (Prometheus Books, 2013), and (with John Irons) *At the edge of the abyss: A concentration camp diary (Dagboek geschreven in Vught, 1977)* by David Koker (Northwestern University Press, 2014). He is currently translating a major work in European political history written by Wim Blockmans. He is University Historian, a Senior Fellow of Massey College, and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. He served as national president of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies for eight years. In 2002 he received the Milner Memorial Award from the Canadian Association of University Teachers “in recognition of his distinguished service in the cause of academic freedom.”