

A Sceptical Review of Bregman's 'Humankind: A Hopeful History'

by [C. R. Hallpike](#) (July 2020)



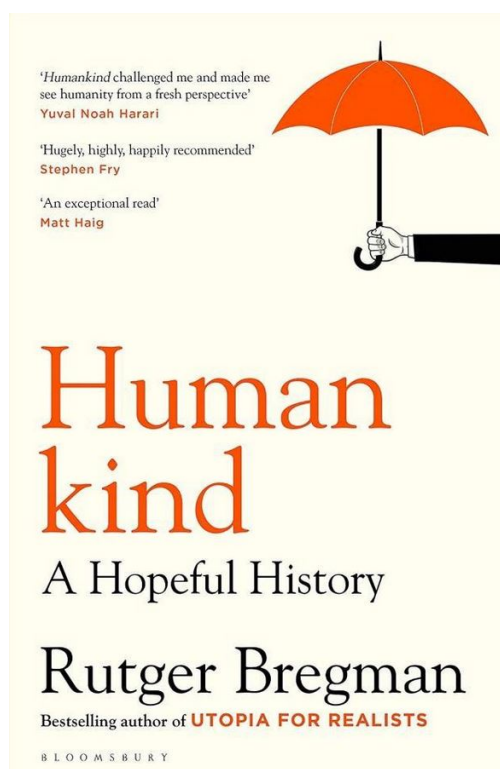
Weltuntergang (End of the World), Per Kirkeby, 2001–02

There is a fashionable view that human nature is essentially selfish, competitive, and aggressive. Whenever people appear to be altruistic, so the narrative goes, we always find that they are really acting in their own interests or to bolster their own self-esteem. This view has certainly been popularised by generations of economists and political theorists, and has been a prominent feature of business schools and the financial world. Evolutionary biologists in particular have tied themselves in knots trying to explain how human beings have managed to develop highly complex systems of

social co-operation if they are fundamentally selfish. As Bregman quite rightly says in his book, this is certainly a false and one-sided view of human nature that needs correcting: there is indeed plenty of evidence that human beings (apart from psychopaths) are *also* genuinely altruistic, kind, and co-operative although Bregman is certainly not the first person to say so.

Back in the nineteenth century Herbert Spencer pointed out that we have a kind of dual nature, displaying what he called “the ethics of amity” to our kin, neighbours, and those we consider members of “our group”, and, potentially, “the ethics of enmity” to those we consider outsiders, and Darwin completely agreed with him, emphasising the importance of co-operation for successful human groups in the struggle for survival. Wars between nations, for example, would be impossible if we were fundamentally selfish because we would all simply run away rather than risk our lives for our country. So I do not think that many anthropologists would be startled to hear that amity and enmity, co-operation and competition, are simply the opposite sides of the same coin. *Some* degree of selfishness is in any case a pre-requisite of survival. As Michael Tomasello very reasonably says, “All viable organisms must have a selfish streak; they must be concerned about their own survival and well-being or they will not be leaving many offspring. But human co-operation and helpfulness are, as it were, laid on top of this self-interested foundation” (Tomasello 2009:4-5).

Unfortunately it takes Bregman more than 200 pages of amateurish anthropology discussing the Neanderthals, hunter-



gatherers, agriculture, and the rise of the state, as well as a host of other topics (including the *Lord of the Flies*, domestication, Stanley Milgram and his electric shock experiment, soldiers who wouldn't fire their weapons, and the murder of Susan Genovese) before he finally reaches the fairly obvious conclusion that "The sad truth is that empathy and xenophobia go hand in hand. They're two sides of the same coin" (Bregman 217).

In his opinion the problem is that our natural habitat for 95% of our history was the hunter-gatherer band, where we all lived in freedom, equality and friendship, but this was ruined by the adoption of agriculture and private property. This was "the biggest mistake of all time" that ripped us out of our natural habitat and gave us "the curse of civilisation". "From the moment we began settling in one place and amassing private property, our group instinct was no longer so innocuous. Combined with scarcity and hierarchies, it became downright toxic. And once leaders began raising armies to do their bidding, there was no stopping the corruptive effects of power" (Bregman 244).

As a journalist he not only knows very little anthropology but also has an irritating folksy style and refers to humans as "*Homo puppy*", and to Machiavelli, sometime Florentine ambassador, as "a down-and-out-city-clerk", and says of hunter-gatherers "Nature provided everything they needed, leaving plenty of time to relax, hang out, and hook up".

He begins the book by claiming that " . . . humans have for millennia navigated by a faulty self-image. For ages, we've assumed that people are selfish, that we're beasts, or worse. For ages, we've believed civilisation is a flimsy veneer that will crack at the merest provocation." Whether "We," as distinct from the intelligentsia, have actually believed this is a moot point, but the first part of the book is nevertheless dominated by the historic figures of Hobbes

and Rousseau, because he thinks their influence has been staggering: “ . . . the opposing views of these two heavyweights are at the root of society’s deepest divides” (Bregman 44).

Philosophers are certainly accustomed to refer reverentially to Hobbes as “the greatest political philosopher produced by the English-speaking peoples,” or something similar, but to the anthropologist his ideas are simply uninformed nonsense. For example, his explanation of human psychology is based on *physics* and the laws of motion, which is not a promising start, and his theory of “the state of nature” is no more convincing. He is faced by the problem of how prehistoric man organized his life and society, and his research technique, if we may call it one, is simply to invite his reader “To consider with himselfe, when taking a journey, he armes himselfe, and seeks to go well accompanied; when going to sleep, he locks his dores; when even in his house he locks his chests; and this when he knows there bee Lawes, and publike Officers, armed, to revenge all injuries shall bee done him.” How much worse, then, it must have been in a time when we lived in a state of nature with no government at all to enforce law and order, so Hobbes concludes that therefore the life of early man must obviously have been “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.” Philosophers presumably feel that this very elegantly eliminates the need actually to know anything about the social life of hunter-gatherers.

If the villain of Bregman’s book is Hobbes, his hero is Rousseau, who believed the opposite: that in “the state of nature” before the invention of agriculture man had been altruistic, compassionate and peaceful. Although Rousseau was as ignorant as Hobbes about primitive societies, Bregman is nevertheless convinced that he was a great thinker who is still highly relevant today. “Take,” he says, “this scathing passage about the invention of private property”:

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. How many crimes, how many wars, how many murders, how many misfortunes and horrors, would that man have saved the human species, who pulling up the stakes or filling up the ditches should have cried to his fellows: Be sure not to listen to this imposter; you are lost if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong equally to us all, and the earth itself to nobody!

Ever since the birth of that cursed civil society, Rousseau argued, things had gone wrong. Farming, urbanisation, statehood—they hadn't lifted us out of chaos, but enslaved and doomed us. The invention of writing and the printing press had only made matters worse...Civilisation, to his mind, had been one giant mistake." (Bregman 46)

These are not deep insights, however, but the babblings of a madman who would like to see all literature, music, and the arts, science, great architecture, technology and medicine swept away, and humanity reduced to sitting naked in the dirt on the ground munching on a root. If the numerous members of the intelligentsia who have added their praises to the cover of this book were to be magically transported to a traditional hunter-gatherer society with the prospect of spending the rest of their lives there, they would be begging for mercy within a few hours. Some degree of inequality and exploitation are simply inevitable features of modern large-scale, complex civilisation which have to be accepted.

This long-standing idolisation of hunter-gather society rests not only on a highly selective view of civilisation but on almost complete ignorance of anthropology. In the first place, the development of agriculture did not, as Rousseau, Bregman and many people assume, produce the institution of private property for the simple reason that the

clearing of the ground of trees and brush, the preparation of the soil, planting and weeding, and perhaps fencing are all communal activities beyond the powers of a single individual. Anthropologists have studied many stateless farming societies, and the general rule is that land is owned by groups of kin or neighbours, and individual members of these groups inherit the right simply to *use* this land. (Individual *ownership* is typically a much later development.)

Bregman thinks that the private ownership of land must have brought the hunter-gatherer pattern of sharing to an end and replaced it with selfish acquisitiveness, competition, and growing inequality. What in fact happened was that populations increased and became dominated by kin groups like clans and lineages, and these developed leaders based on seniority of birth. There was also a marked tendency for kin and neighbourhood groups to develop norms of mutual support and solidarity that were much stronger than those typical of hunter-gatherer bands. This was in part because of their inherent stability, by contrast with the shifting composition of bands. The Konso (Hallpike 2008) with whom I lived in Ethiopia, for example, were advanced farmers whose ancestors had lived in the same very large settlements for many generations and were notable for their high degree of neighbourly co-operation. Not being able to move freely to other settlements, they had every incentive to behave properly to one another. The Tauade of Papua New Guinea (Hallpike 1977), on the other hand, were shifting cultivators and also had very impermanent group membership, and this lack of social solidarity was a most important factor in their high level of violence.

Many people like Bregman believe that the bands of our hunter-gatherer ancestors must have been altruistic and compassionate, united by a team-spirit of group loyalty and comradeship, but studies of modern hunter-gatherers do not support this. Members of bands move from one to another at

marriage, or to avoid those with whom they have quarrelled, and so are not under the same constraints as members of the Konso type of society. Although sharing and mutual generosity are certainly basic customary practices, we should not exaggerate their compassionate and comradely aspects, because all this gift-giving is based on quite conscious self-interest—if you don't help others they won't help you. There is also a strong undercurrent of envy, which makes people uneasy if they have more than some other members of the group.

Anthropologist Lorna Marshall says of the Bushmen, for example, "Their security and comfort must be achieved side-by-side with self-interest, and much jealous watchfulness. Altruism, kindness, sympathy, or genuine generosity were not qualities that I observed often in their behaviour." (Marshall 1976:350). Nor is there much evidence that band members are especially loyal and supportive of one another. Among the Chewong of Malaysia, Signe Lise Howell says, "Individuals are expected to, and on the whole do, carry on their activities on their own. It is a rare sight to witness someone asking someone else for assistance. Similarly, offers of assistance are also rare. I have many times watched strong young people lying about all day while old, and sometimes ill, people toil with heavy work without asking for or receiving help" (Howell 1989:38). According to James Woodburn, "The Hadza [of Tanzania] are strikingly uncommitted to each other; what happens to the individual Hadza, even close relatives, does not really matter very much. People are often very affectionate to each other, but the affection is generally not accompanied by much sense of responsibility. If someone becomes ill he is likely to be tended only so long as this is convenient." (Woodburn 1968:91). He discusses, in this connection, how they often leave the sick to die, and gives the example of a paralysed boy abandoned by his mother and other close relatives only a few miles from water, to which they could have carried him without too much difficulty. Real group loyalty and altruistic self-sacrifice, like romantic

love, are not universal features of humanity, but the products of more complex societies which impose more constraints on their members.

Nor is Bregman correct in claiming that hunter-gatherers were basically peaceful and non-violent, and that warfare only began with farming. In the 1960s, hunters and gatherers, in the spirit of the age, were naturally portrayed as especially peace-loving and unaggressive, and it was fashionable to believe that they represented the real nature of Man before greed, militarism and, of course, capitalism, had corrupted it. (There was even a hoax tribe, "the *Gentle Tasaday*," produced in the Philippines to lend credibility to this belief.) This amiable illusion cannot be maintained, and there is a good deal of evidence to show that hunter-gatherers could quite well be aggressive and warlike. While there was considerable variation among hunter-gatherer societies in levels of violence, very high death rates from fighting are recorded for some Aboriginal groups such as the Tiwi and the Murngin, for example, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—although these fatalities occurred over many years of small skirmishes. Defence of territory is also recorded for some Eskimo groups in earlier times, as it is for the Indians of Tierra del Fuego, the Pygmies, Bushmen and Hadza, and there is plenty of evidence that in hunter-gatherer societies generally, quarrels sometimes led to homicide. The relatively low-level warfare found among the hunter-gatherers seems to have been more often related to vengeance than to any serious competition over resources, vengeance involving quarrels over insults, and disputes that got out of hand leading to murder. Fighting over women was an especially significant cause of violence in these societies, a cause of tension that was sometimes aggravated by the custom of female infanticide. Warner gives a very detailed and vivid account of fighting and its causes among the Australian Murngin:

There are six distinct varieties of warfare among the

Murngin. Each. has a separate pattern of behaviour and an individual name. In addition to these there is another form in which only the women participate. The names are nirimaoi yelno, a fight within the camp; narrup or djawarlt a secret method of killing ; maringo (death adder), a night attack in which the entire camp is surrounded; milwerangel, a general open fight between at least two groups; gaingar (ghost spear), a pitched battle, and makaratay a ceremonial peace-making fight which is partly an ordeal. Each six forms will be described in detail.

Out of seventy-two engagements [over 20 years] in which men were killed, twenty- nine were slain by a gaingar fight, thirty-five by maringo, twenty-seven by narrup, three by milwerangel, and two by nirimaoi yolno. Although the last is the most frequent type of fight, it seldom results in killings; gaingar, on the other hand, has only happened twice in the last twenty years, yet it has accounted for the deaths of twenty-nine men (Warner 1930: 457-8).

For the last twenty years, out of some seventy battles that were recorded for this paper in which members of the Murngin factions were killed, fifty were caused by the desire to avenge the killing of a relative, usually a clansman, by members of another clan (blood revenge). Of these, fifteen were killings that were done deliberately, against the tradition of what is fair cause for a war, because it was felt that their enemies had killed the wrong people when they retaliated for injuries done them. Ten killings were due to members of a clan stealing a woman, or obtaining a woman who belonged to another clan, by illegal means. Five men were killed because they had slain men by black magic. The clans of the men killed by magic slew the men who were supposed to be the magicians. Five men were

slain because they looked at a totemic emblem under improper circumstances and by so doing insulted the members of the clan to whom it belonged as well as endangered the latter's spiritual strength. The underlying idea back of the causes for most Murngin warfare is that the same injury should be inflicted upon the enemy group that one's own group has suffered. This having been done, a clan feels satisfied: if not, there is always a compelling urge within the group for vengeance, which causes a continuous restlessness among those who are out "buy back" the killing of one of their clansmen (Warner 1931: 458).

The following episode in which two women were killed conveys a strong flavour of their attitude to human life:

Some years ago the Liagaomir clan was holding a totemic ceremony and using their carpet-snake totemic emblems (painted wooden trumpets). A woman belonging to the Birkili clan, and a second belonging to the Liagomir, stole up to the ceremonial ground and watched the men blowing the wooden trumpet during the ceremony. They went back to the women's camp and told them what they had seen. When the men came back to the camp and heard of their behaviour, Yanindja, the leader, said: "When will we kill them?" Everyone replied, "Immediately." The two women were instantly put to death by members of their own clan with the help of the men from the other group (ibid., 459).

But warfare between different groups of hunter-gatherers was obviously limited by the sheer lack of numbers of adult men, and by the lack of social organisation and leadership to coordinate military actions of any significance. It was certainly not as marked a feature of hunter-gatherers as it later becomes with the much larger and more tightly organised societies of farmers and pastoralists. Even without actual warfare, however, Bregman exaggerates the relaxed

“cosmopolitan” attitude of hunter-gatherers to strangers, who often fell entirely outside the range of those to whom any concern was due. Among the Eskimo, for example, Balikci records that “In traditional times fear, intense suspicion, and potential or actual hostility permeated relations between strangers” (Balikci 1970:158). The !Kung Bushman says of people from other ethnic groups “We call creatures who are different from us !hohm [wild animals] because when they speak we cannot understand a word” (Lee 1984:131).

According to Bregman the wars that broke out with the beginning of agriculture were fought over land, (though this was not necessarily the case at all), and because villagers became increasingly intolerant of outsiders, except when we could band together against other groups that threatened us. (Again, this was not necessarily the case, and outsiders might be welcomed as additional sources of military strength and labour power in agriculture.)

Clans began forming alliances to defend against other clans. Leaders emerged, likely charismatic figures who'd proved their mettle on the battlefield. Each new conflict further secured their position. In time these generals grew so wedded to their authority that they'd no longer give it up, even in peacetime. Usually the generals found themselves forcibly deposed. 'There must have been thousands of upstarts', one historian notes, 'who failed to make the leap to a permanent kingship.' But there were also times when intervention came too late, when a general had already drummed up enough followers to shield himself from the plebs. If we want to understand the phenomenon of 'war', we have to look at people calling the shots. The generals and kings, presents and advisers: these are the Leviathans who wage war, knowing it boosts their power and prestige. (Bregman, 101)

This is reminiscent of a very bad undergraduate essay:

military prowess did not lead directly to political authority, which also had to be legitimated by descent and religious status; and if we want to understand the phenomenon of war the first thing we need to do is understand the difference between primitive war, typical of uncentralised tribes, and the 'true' warfare of centralised states, which Bregman hopelessly confuses in this passage. Among uncentralised tribes, many of whom would have been shifting cultivators, the pattern of violence was one of continuous feuding and homicides, rather than the episodic battles typical of state warfare, and many authorities have noted the extraordinarily high death rates that could accumulate over the years in these societies. Roser (2013) and Livingstone (1968), for example quote numerous instances of stateless societies from around the world with violent mortalities among males of 20% to 50% per generation, which would give death rates of several hundred per 100,000 of population. For example, in the local group of Tauade with whom I lived in Papua New Guinea, over a period of about fifty years there seems to have been almost 1 violent death a year in a population of around 180, or 550 per 100,000.

The development of the state, on the other hand, brought about a general lessening of violence *within* societies because it placed a monopoly of armed force in the hands of the ruler. In medieval London, for example, the murder rate has been estimated at about 20 per 100,000, and much the same for the rest of the country. While this was ten times the rate of modern times, it was vastly less than the rate of tribal societies. The two World Wars raised the death rates in Germany and Russia to around 150 per 100,000 (Roser 2013), but even that was still far less than the death rate of many tribal societies.

But the development of the state is not all about war and violence, and so far we have not considered two aspects of human nature that are not directly implicated in the discussion of whether we are naturally selfish or altruistic.

The first is the innate human love not only of personal adornment but of luxury and material possessions in general, and the second is ambition and love of power. Once the state facilitated the development of technology and crafts the upper classes throughout the history of civilisation have used their position to finance lifestyles of the greatest extravagance in houses, dress, food, and every other aspect of life. This luxury went far beyond the requirements of running the state and any conceivable material needs. The institutions of the state were also a magnet for personal ambition and provided extraordinary opportunities for the abuse of power, which certainly corrupts. (This, it should be noted, is quite distinct from the love of wealth – many powerful people, from medieval clergy to modern dictators have led notably austere lives.)

The world religions that began developing in the first millennium BC were in part a moral response to these developments, and their opposition to worldly pride, vanity, the love of money, and materialism has continued to the present day. In the Western world this has been the Christian Church, and its long dialogue over the centuries with power and wealth has been far more wide-ranging and important in its social influence than our beliefs about human nature. Indeed, since Bregman admits that our potential hostility to other groups is a basic facet of our empathy with our own people, then it cannot follow that

. . . if we believe most people are decent and kind, everything changes. We can completely rethink how we organise our schools and prisons, our businesses and democracies. And how we live our own lives. (381).

In other words, he never really resolves the basic dilemma “naturally nice to insiders – naturally nasty to outsiders” and therefore cannot confront the fundamental issue of diversity, and the plain fact that diversity does not unify

society—it divides it, as we can see every time we open a newspaper. Social conflict around the world is quite obviously exacerbated by *differences* in nationality, race, culture, and religion, as we can see from the fate of multi-ethnic confederations throughout the twentieth century: the United Kingdom lost Ireland in 1922 and may lose Scotland, while Ireland itself has been split by the hostility between Catholics and Protestants; Belgium can hardly hold the Flemings and Walloons together, and Anglophone Canada nearly lost French Quebec in 1995. Chinese Singapore seceded from the Malaysian Federation, the Slovaks parted company with the Czechs in 1993, and Yugoslavia had already exploded violently into its six component peoples; Sri Lanka fought a civil war with its Tamil minority, and in Rwanda the Hutu slaughtered 800,000 Tutsis; in the Middle East Shias and Sunnis and Israelis and Palestinians still battle it out, and the multi-ethnic Soviet Union collapsed in 1992.

It is also perfectly obvious that allowing mass immigration into Europe has introduced the same issues of social tensions and identity politics, but an additional problem here is the obsession with equality of outcomes. Every section of the population has different interests, priorities and, yes, different aptitudes, but when one section does not achieve the number of University Vice-Chancellors, or Members of Parliament, or High Court judges that corresponds to its proportion of the population it claims to be the victim of oppression and discrimination. Wise government should try to bring out the best in human nature, but popular political ideology in Western society is bringing out the worst, and Bregman's book does not really give us much help here.

References

- Balikci, A. 1970. *The Netsilik Eskimo*. New York: Natural History Press.
- Hallpike, C.R. 1977. *Bloodshed and Vengeance in the Papuan*

Mountains. The generation of conflict in Tauade society. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Hallpike, C.R. 2008. *The Konso of Ethiopia*. (2nd ed.). Milton Keynes: AuthorHouse UK.

Howell, S. 1989. *Society and Cosmos. The Chewong of Peninsular Malaysia*. (2nd ed.) Chicago University Press.

Lee, R.B. 1984. *The Dobe !Kung*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston.

Livingstone, F.B. 1968. "The effects of warfare on the biology of the human species," in *War. The anthropology of armed conflict and aggression*. 3-15. New York: Natural History Press.

Marshall, L. 1976. "Sharing, talking, and giving: relief of social tension among the !Kung Bushmen." in *Kalahari Hunter-Gatherers*, eds. R.B.Lee & I. De Vore, 349-71. Harvard University Press.

Roser, M. 2013. "Ethnographic and Archaeological Evidence on Violent Deaths". *Published online at OurWorldInData.org*. Retrieved from: <https://ourworldindata.org/ethnographic-and-archaeological-evidence-on-violent-deaths> [Online Resource].

Tomasello, M. 2009. *Why We Co-operate*. MIT Press.

Warner, W. L. 1931. "Murngin warfare", *Oceania* 1(4), 457-94.

Woodburn, J. 1968. Discussion in *Man the Hunter*, eds. R.B.Lee & I. De Vore, p. 91. Chicago: Aldine.

«[Previous Article](#) [Table of Contents](#) [Next Article](#)»

C. R. Hallpike is Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at McMaster University, Canada, and an Oxford D.Litt, and spent a lifetime's research living with mountain tribes in Ethiopia and Papua New Guinea and writing many books about them and on morality, religion, culture and social evolution. He is the author of [*Do We Need God To Be Good?*](#) (2017), [*Ethical Thought in Increasingly Complex Societies: Social Structure and Moral Development*](#) (2016), [*On Primitive Society: and other forbidden topics*](#) (2011), and [*How We Got Here: Bows and Arrows to the Space Age*](#) (2008).

NER on Twitter