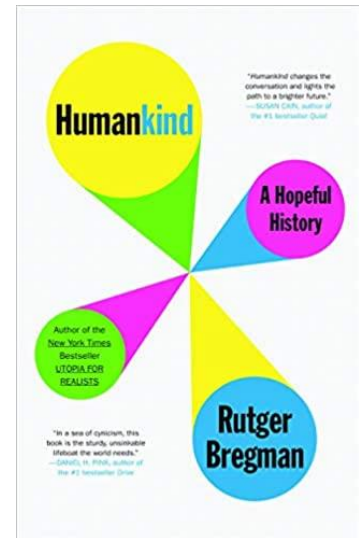


Think the Best of Others – With Caveats
a review of

Humankind: A Hopeful History

By Rutger Bregman (2019)



The amazing lesson of history is that most people are much nicer than we suspect – provided that we get to know them. Bregman’s book is an eminently readable account of his compilations and investigations of everyday miracles of community. Being widely read myself, I was familiar with quite a few of these stories but always learned something new. Think of how traditional soldiers are reluctant to shoot or who fraternize with the enemy at Christmastime, how bored teens actually behave when shipwrecked on a remote island (vs *Lord of the Flies*), or how Mandela ended apartheid in South Africa – using love to overcome hate.

One result that seems surprising at first is that too much *empathy* has a downside. That is, if you empathize too much with the suffering of a particular individual, you may end up being too hard on the multitude who are supposedly responsible. That is, “empathy makes us less forgiving, because the more we identify with victims, the more we generalize about our enemies” (p 216). Far better is *compassion* – understanding, sympathy, and well-thought-out action without succumbing to wrenching emotion relieved by satisfying but counterproductive finger pointing.

Certain ideologies are very good at exploiting empathy for dubious purposes. A current example are the blame and shame dogmas of the “whiteness studies” of critical race theory, reminiscent of the Jew-blaming of the far right, except for the inverted racial hierarchy. War mongering propaganda is another prominent example.

A similar downside comes from trusting leaders too much, based on our natural trust of those we know. Again, we need to use our heads – to know from history that power corrupts, even in the absence of Machiavellian confidants. The result is often “acquired sociopathy”, as unchecked leaders become more “impulsive, self-centered, reckless, arrogant, and rude” (p 227). Simply becoming less connected to

others can account for a good part of such behavior, with the result that “power is like a drug – with a whole catalogue of side effects” (p 228).

Bregman sums up the lessons he learned in 10 rules to live by. (1) “When in doubt, assume the best”. (2) “Think in win-win scenarios”. (3) “Ask more questions”. (4) “Temper your empathy, train your compassion”. (5) “Try to understand the other even if you don’t get where they’re coming from”. (6) “Love your own as others love their own”. (7) “Avoid the news”. (8) “Don’t punch the Nazis”. (9) “Come out of the closet: don’t be ashamed to do good”. (10) “Be realistic”. I’d say that these compare favorably with Jordan Peterson’s more verbose and preachy “12 Rules for Life”.