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Review

Socialism will never work, it's human nature innit?

- Reviews section -

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How many times, when you have been discussing the possibility of socialism or any sort of progressive change with friends, have they used an old cliché against you? It's human nature, at the end of the day, people are selfish.

But there is a different way of looking at it. I remember as a young man saying to my dad, who worked his whole life for Prudential Assurance; surely people are fiddling their claims all the time. He replied that all the evidence was to the contrary. 'Most people are honest,' he said 'and the basic trust between the insurer and the client made it work more or less.'

Professor John Drury, a member of a subgroup to the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage), said evidence shows that rather than mass panic or selfishness in times of emergency, people actually tend to show solidarity and cooperation.

Jonathan Jones, Guardian art critic, comments on the current exhibition at the British Museum on Arctic – Culture and Climate

"This show is in the end a rebuke to the fashionable view that Homo sapiens is a monster who began by wiping out mammoths and [Neanderthals](#) and has gone on from there. It reveals a more human view of humanity. We're not the devil. People have lived alongside and, yes, killed the animals of the Arctic, but without destroying their world." [1]

Bregman systematically and logically takes apart the commonsense view that humans are not capable of creating a better society. He deconstructs some of the famous psychological experiments that somehow were supposed to prove people will inflict pain on others if ordered to by authority. In Paul Goodman's words he is a master bullshit detector as he pulls apart their data and methodology. Better still he makes the link between the interests of those in power over us and the use of this ideology of human's badness. The true paradox is that scientific evidence proves we are decent but people generally believe the opposite.

Unlike a lot of both activist and academic Marxists he also writes clearly, with a deft wit that keeps you reading. No wonder he has sold millions of copies. That is precisely why we on the left should engage with him. We can use many of his arguments and we benefit from hooking into the mass audience he has achieved for his ideas.

Do humans always fight one another in extreme situations?

In extreme conditions of danger and survival people will fight and try and save themselves. Surely that is right. Well no, Bregman cites the mass bombing of civilians by both the Germans and British to show that far from destroying morale and leading to a breakdown of society people rallied and worked cooperatively. The Blitz spirit is not some uniquely British trait beloved of nostalgic Brexiteers, it is profoundly human. Remember Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005? A lot of the press talked of rapes, killings and breakdown of law and order. Looking behind the media picture he shows reality was quite the opposite.

There are two key sources of ideology reinforcing what he calls the veneer theory that convinces us we are fatally flawed. One is twenty-four hour news coverage, which tends to focus on the visual and the disruptive. Media companies know that the shock of violent events, surface glamour and disruption is more likely to grab people's short attention span than discussing complex social relations.

A second driver is the way economists and capitalist markets reinforce “the idea of ‘homo economicus’ – always intent on personal gain, like selfish, calculating robots” (p16). Christianity inculcates the idea of original sin, eating the apple and leaving Eden. Enlightenment thinkers continued the notion of our depraved nature but with the added redemption of reason rather than piety as a modifier. Darwin’s theory was later interpreted as the proof of the selfish gene, of the battle between everyone for survival.

Dissidents, Marxists, anarchists put forward a different approach. As Emma Goldman stated:

“Poor human nature, what horrible crimes have been committed in thy name! ... The greater the mental charlatan, the more definite his insistence on the wickedness and weakness of human.” (p 19)

Bregman warns us that to stand up for human goodness means confronting cynicism and ridicule but above all it means:

“to take a stand against the powers to be. For the powerful a hopeful view of human nature is downright threatening. Subversive. Seditious. It implies we are not selfish beasts that need to be reined in, restrained and regulated. It implies we need a different kind of leadership.” (p19)

Why the Lord of the Flies doesn't tell the whole story

A lot of the reviews of the book have focused on the story of a real Lord of the Flies. William Golding's story of schoolboys stranded on a desert island whose struggle for survival ends in conflict and violence has become a well established part of our culture, a story we tell about ourselves, throughout the world. It has been on the curriculum in thousands of schools for years. It reinforces a pessimistic view of human nature.

However Bregman stumbled on the real story of some young Pacific islanders who, bored with school, took a fishing boat but ended up drifting onto a deserted island. Their real story ended quite differently and they survived through cooperation. Now of course these boys were part of a small close-knit religious-minded group but nevertheless their real experience contradicts the supposed truisms of the Golding book. We could argue that Golding's story was taken up so enthusiastically, including in schools, because it chimed so well with dominant ideology.

Just as Marx and Engels referred to the “primitive communism” of the hunting and gathering mode of production so does Bregman in his examination of how homo sapiens evolved. He argues that it was not a selfish gene that facilitated survival and evolution but the fact we are:

“ultra-social learning machines. We're born to learn, to bond and to play. Maybe it's not so strange, then, that blushing is the only human expression that's uniquely human. Blushing, after all, is quintessentially social – it's people showing they care what others think, which fosters trust and enables cooperation.” (p69)

Not only are hunter gatherers more social but they were also more connected to a sense of Mother Nature, something that has been lost in most of the world today. Following classic Marxist thinking Bregman explains the change towards more antagonistic social relations with the rise of settlements, surpluses and agriculture.(p101)

Debunking notorious psychological experiments

After sharing a lot of historical research that shows that the ordinary soldiers in most wars have been rather reluctant killers, Bregman proceeds to expertly debunk two of the most famous psychological experiments that supposedly revealed our innate evil. In the Stanford Prison experiment, students were recruited into the roles of prison guards and prisoners and the role play became so real and vicious that it had to be abandoned prematurely. He cites a BBC replay of the experiment in 2001 that ended with completely opposite results. A key difference was unlike the original Stanford psychologist, Zimbardo, the BBC psychologists did not brief the guards in the same way he did. Left on their own, humans do not necessarily start mistreating the prisoners. (p156)

The other experiment that many of us know about is the Milgram electric shock one. Here volunteers are instructed by authority figures in white coats to increase the electric shock if the person in the other room answers questions incorrectly. The volunteers do not know the person receiving the shocks is an actor. The results claimed up to two thirds of these people were willing to electrocute complete strangers. This study was often cited in relation to Hannah Arendt's idea of the banality of evil.

However delving further Bregman found that the volunteers grew more disobedient the more authority figures insisted on them continuing. And many of the subjects followed orders because they believed it was for medical research, so their altruism was overriding their doubts. (p168). In his tour of these so-called psychological truths he also debunks the bystander effect – the idea that people today stand by and do not help people in danger. To a large extent the media constructs a news story based on urban myths about bystanders not getting involved rather than the actual reality.

If people are good why do we end up with the regimes we do?

Bregman is weaker in this area because his analysis hops about, here using psychological ideas about the number of people you can empathise with, there dealing with the ideology of religion and then correctly showing how it is not ideology only in the end but the threat of violence that is effective. Violence means not just open repression if you revolt but the brutality of the wage relationship and the market.

What is missing is a theory of social relations based on an understanding of economic relations – a materialist understanding of class and the nature of state power. He ends up linking the success of state power to leaders' ability to be shameless.

In general, he sees his writing as a battle of ideas. Winning people to his good ideas will change things. A conception mobilising people politically based on systematic class antagonism is absent so it ends up being a little like a new age Fabian position. Hence his blueprint for change at the end of Humankind is rather moralistic: ten rules for life based on his positive reading of human nature.

The first one goes back to my old man's dictum about trust. When in doubt, assume the best – trust people even if you may be conned sometimes. He talks about a win-win approach which is ostensibly against things like competitive schools and that nice prisons actually save money. This is okay as far as it goes but it refuses to see how the system is set up to make people lose. It is for most people a zero-sum game.

In other words, in order for capital to survive and keep its rate of profit people have to be exploited and inequality maintained, both the capitalist and the worker cannot both win. Other rules he champions are the need for participatory democracy and asking questions of power but he cannot see how self organisation of working people can develop a counter power. He contradicts himself a bit when another of his rules is about not being nice when you

need to tell home truths.

In fact his earlier book, *Utopia for Realists* is better in some respects since there he focuses less on individual human moral action and discusses practical policies a lot more. He adopts what I would consider a quasi Marxist position by saying the huge human material progress that has been made – health care, education, standards of living, lowering of violence in many parts of the world – shows there is a realistic basis, a materialist basis for building a better world.

“Capitalism opened the gates to the Land of Plenty, but capitalism alone cannot sustain it. Progress has become synonymous with economic prosperity, but the 21st century will challenge us to find other ways of boosting our quality of life. And while young people in the West have largely come to age in an era of apolitical technocracy, we will have to return to politics again to find a new utopia” (p19)

Marxists accept an idea of progress insofar as each mode of production produces the basis for its potential transformation into a higher form of society. He accepts that this comes with contradictions since there is increased inequality, obesity, mental ill health even in those better-off societies not to mention the absolute poverty especially in the global south. Bregman does not really integrate Rosa Luxemburg's alternative of socialism or barbarism nor the linked ecological disaster that the development of the productive forces based on carbon fuels and extractivism is bringing about.

However a stand out chapter in the book that the left can use in its campaign to support freedom of movement and migrants is where he explains how open borders would be one of the most effective ways of helping the global south. (p203)

His discusses Universal Basic Income and makes the obvious point that poor people in the West and the South need money not social workers or professional NGOs telling them what is needed. He cites forgotten research from the Nixon era that proves UBI experiments can make a positive difference to inequality and well being. However he has a tendency of suggesting ingenious solutions which can be implemented that could make people more equal but can be achieved without taking power or resources from anybody else, without serious political conflict based on class interests.

So the rise of Reaganomics in the USA is reduced to a battle of specialist advisors rather than the attacks on the labour unions and cuts in taxes. He extrapolates from some good (win-win) social policies such as giving homes to the homeless in Utah and thereby saving lots of the social costs associated with homelessness to resolving all the problems of systematic inequality.

His attack on banks and other companies that just shift money around without producing anything of value is very good. Likewise, his withering attack on bullshit jobs. His final list of things we need to fight for is much better than his rules to live by mentioned above. He calls for a new labour movement that fights not just for more jobs and higher wages but for work that has an intrinsic value. Progressives should work out policies that actually produce efficiencies and reduce dependence. Such an approach is relevant since it undercuts right wing arguments about the nanny state and the wastefulness of socialist programmes.

Both books are well worth a read and provide socialists with good ammunition. They are weakest when dealing with systematic exploitation, class interests, state power and how we challenge that, not just with ideas or think tanks but with political strategy and organisation based on the potential power of working people.

PS:

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[1] *The Guardian*, 21 October 2020 "[Arctic review – stark eco warnings from the ice-braving hunters who battled whales](#)".