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A Hopeful History

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Bestselling author of **UTOPIA FOR REALISTS**

BLOOMSBURY

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B L O O M S B U R Y

## More praise for *Humankind*

‘An extraordinarily powerful declaration of faith in the innate goodness and natural decency of human beings. Never dewy-eyed, wistful or naive, Rutger Bregman makes a wholly robust and convincing case for believing – despite so much apparent evidence to the contrary – that we are not the savage, irredeemably greedy, violent and rapacious species we can be led into thinking ourselves to be’ Stephen Fry

‘Every revolution in human affairs – and we’re in one right now! – comes in tandem with a new understanding of what we mean by the word “human”. Rutger Bregman has succeeded in reawakening that conversation by articulating a kinder view of humanity (with better science behind it). This book gives us some real hope for the future’ Brian Eno

‘*Humankind* provides the philosophical and historical backbone to give us the confidence to collaborate, be kind and trust each other to build a better society’ Mariana Mazzucato, author of *The Value of Everything*

‘Some books challenge our ideas. But *Humankind* challenges the very premises on which those ideas are based. Its bold, sweeping argument will make you rethink what you believe about society, democracy and human nature itself. In a sea of cynicism, this book is the sturdy, unsinkable lifeboat the world needs’ Daniel H. Pink, author of *Drive*

‘This is a wonderful and uplifting book. I not only want all my friends and relations to read it, but everyone else as well. It is an essential part of the campaign for a better world’ Richard Wilkinson, author of *The Spirit Level*

‘A fantastic read ... Good fun, fresh and a page turner’ James Rebanks,  
author of *The Shepherd’s Life*

‘This stunning book will change how you see the world and your fellow humans. It is mind-expanding and, more importantly, heart-expanding. We have never needed this message more than now’ Johann Hari,  
author of *Lost Connections*

‘Rutger Bregman’s extraordinary new book is a revelation’ Susan Cain,  
author of *Quiet*

‘Rutger Bregman is one of my favourite thinkers. His latest book challenges our basic assumptions about human nature in a way that opens up a world of new possibilities. *Humankind* is simple, perceptive and powerful in the way that the best books and arguments are’ Andrew Yang

‘I have not read anything quite as stunningly well written, insightful and revelatory for a very long time. So long, in fact, that I cannot remember the last time’ Danny Dorling, author of *Inequality and the 1%*

‘This book demolishes the cynical view that humans are inherently nasty and selfish, and paints a portrait of human nature that’s not only more uplifting – it’s also more accurate. Rutger Bregman is one of the most provocative thinkers of our time’ Adam Grant, author of *Give and Take*

‘Put aside your newspaper for a little while and read this book’ Barry Schwartz, author of *Practical Wisdom*

‘I know of no more powerful or carefully documented rejoinder to Machiavelli’s observation that “men never do anything good except out of necessity” than Rutger Bregman’s book. His reassessment of human

nature is as faithful to the actual evidence as it is uplifting' Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, author of *Mothers and Others*

'*Humankind* articulates what we anthropologists have been arguing for decades, only far more beautifully. Want to catch up with the science? Read this book. It's myth-busting at its best, and a hopeful new story for the twenty-first century' Jason Hickel, author of *The Divide*

'*Humankind* is an in-depth overview of what is wrong with the idea that we humans are by nature bad and unreliable. In vivid descriptions and stories, Rutger Bregman takes us back to the questionable experiments that fed this idea and offers us a more optimistic view of mankind' Frans de Waal, author of *Mama's Last Hug*

'This beautifully written, well documented, myth-busting work is now number one on my list of what everyone should read. Read it and buy copies for all of your most cynical friends' Peter Gray, author of *Free to Learn*

## HUMANKIND

*To my parents*

ALSO BY RUTGER BREGMAN

*Utopia for Realists*

# HUMANKIND

*A Hopeful History*

Rutger Bregman

Translated from the Dutch by Elizabeth  
Manton and Erica Moore

B L O O M S B U R Y P U B L I S H I N G

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‘Man will become better when you show him what he is like.’

Anton Chekhov (1860–1904)

[PROLOGUE](#)

On the eve of the Second World War, the British Army Command found itself facing an existential threat. London was in grave danger. The city, according to a certain Winston Churchill, formed ‘the greatest target in the



world, a kind of tremendous fat cow, a valuable fat cow tied up to attract the beasts of prey'.<sup>1</sup>

The beast of prey was, of course, Adolf Hitler and his war machine. If the British population broke under the terror of his bombers, it would spell the end of the nation. 'Traffic will cease, the homeless will shriek for help, the city will be in pandemonium,' feared one British general.<sup>2</sup> Millions of civilians would succumb to the strain, and the army wouldn't even get around to fighting because it would have its hands full with the hysterical masses. Churchill predicted that at least three to four million Londoners would flee the city.

Anyone wanting to read up on all the evils to be unleashed needed only one book: *Psychologie des foules* – 'The Psychology of the Masses' – by one of the most influential scholars of his day, the Frenchman Gustave Le Bon. Hitler read the book cover to cover. So did Mussolini, Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt.

Le Bon's book gives a play by play of how people respond to crisis. Almost instantaneously, he writes, 'man descends several rungs in the ladder of civilization'.<sup>3</sup> Panic and violence erupt, and we humans reveal our true nature.

On 19 October 1939, Hitler briefed his generals on the German plan of attack. 'The ruthless employment of the *Luftwaffe* against the heart of the British will-to-resist,' he said, 'can and will follow at the given moment.'<sup>4</sup>

In Britain, everyone felt the clock ticking. A last-ditch plan to dig a network of underground shelters in London was considered, but ultimately scrapped over concerns that the populace, paralysed by fear, would never re-emerge. At the last moment, a few psychiatric field hospitals were thrown up outside the city to tend to the first wave of victims.

And then it began.

On 7 September 1940, 348 German bomber planes crossed the Channel. The fine weather had drawn many Londoners outdoors, so when the sirens sounded at 4:43 p.m. all eyes went to the sky.

That September day would go down in history as Black Saturday, and what followed as 'the Blitz'. Over the next nine months, more than 80,000 bombs would be dropped on London alone. Entire neighbourhoods were wiped out. A million buildings in the capital were damaged or destroyed, and more than 40,000 people in the UK lost their lives.

So how did the British react? What happened when the country was bombed for months on end? Did people get hysterical? Did they behave like brutes?

Let me start with the eyewitness account of a Canadian psychiatrist.

In October 1940, Dr John MacCurdy drove through south-east London to visit a poor neighbourhood that had been particularly hard hit. All that remained was a patchwork of craters and crumbling buildings. If there was one place sure to be in the grip of pandemonium, this was it.

So what did the doctor find, moments after an air raid alarm? 'Small boys continued to play all over the pavements, shoppers went on haggling, a policeman directed traffic in majestic boredom and the bicyclists defied death and the traffic laws. No one, so far as I could see, even looked into the sky.'<sup>5</sup>

In fact, if there's one thing that all accounts of the Blitz have in common it's their description of the strange serenity that settled over London in those months. An American journalist interviewing a British couple in their kitchen noted how they sipped tea even as the windows rattled in their frames. Weren't they afraid?, the journalist wanted to know. 'Oh no,' was the answer. 'If we were, what good would it do us?'<sup>6</sup>

Evidently, Hitler had forgotten to account for one thing: the quintessential British character. The stiff upper lip. The wry humour, as expressed by shop owners who posted signs in front of their wrecked premises announcing: MORE OPEN THAN USUAL. Or the pub proprietor who in the midst of devastation advertised: OUR WINDOWS ARE GONE, BUT OUR SPIRITS ARE EXCELLENT. COME IN AND TRY THEM.<sup>7</sup>

The British endured the German air raids much as they would a delayed train. Irritating, to be sure, but tolerable on the whole. Train services, as it happens, also continued during the Blitz, and Hitler's tactics scarcely left a dent in the domestic economy. More detrimental to the British war machine was Easter Monday in April 1941, when everybody had the day off.<sup>8</sup>

Within weeks after the Germans launched their bombing campaign, updates were being reported much like the weather: 'Very blitzy tonight.'<sup>9</sup> According to an American observer, 'the English get bored so much more quickly than they get anything else, and nobody is taking cover much any longer'.<sup>10</sup>

And the mental devastation, then? What about the millions of traumatised victims the experts had warned about? Oddly enough, they were nowhere to be found. To be sure, there was sadness and fury; there was terrible grief at the loved ones lost. But the psychiatric wards remained empty. Not only that, public mental health actually improved. Alcoholism tailed off. There were fewer suicides than in peacetime. After the war ended, many British would yearn for the days of the Blitz, when everybody helped each other out and no one cared about your politics, or whether you were rich or poor.<sup>11</sup>

'British society became in many ways strengthened by the Blitz,' a British historian later wrote. 'The effect on Hitler was disillusioning.'<sup>12</sup>

When put to the test, the theories set forth by celebrated crowd psychologist Gustave Le Bon could hardly have been further off the mark. Crisis brought out not the worst, but the *best* in people. If anything, the British moved up a few rungs on the ladder of civilisation. 'The courage, humor, and kindness of ordinary people,' an American journalist confided in her diary, 'continue to be astonishing under conditions that possess many of the features of a nightmare.'<sup>13</sup>

These unexpected impacts of the German bombings sparked a debate on strategy in Britain. As the Royal Air Force prepared to deploy its own fleet of bombers against the enemy, the question was how to do so most effectively.

Curiously, given the evidence, the country's military experts still espoused the idea that a nation's morale could be broken. By bombs. True, it hadn't worked on the British, the reasoning went, but they were a special case. No other people on the planet could match their levelheadedness and fortitude. Certainly not the Germans, whose fundamental 'lack of moral fibre' meant they would 'not stand a quarter of the bombing' the British endured.<sup>14</sup>

Among those who endorsed this view was Churchill's close friend Frederick Lindemann, also known as Lord Cherwell. A rare photograph of him shows a tall man with a cane, wearing a bowler hat and an icy expression.<sup>15</sup> In the fierce debate over air strategy, Lindemann remained adamant: bombing *works*. Like Gustave Le Bon, he took a dim view of the masses, writing them off as cowardly and easily panicked.

To prove his point, Lindemann dispatched a team of psychiatrists to Birmingham and Hull, two cities where the German bombings had taken an especially heavy toll. They interviewed hundreds of men, women and children who had lost their homes during the Blitz, inquiring about the smallest details – 'down to the number of pints drunk and aspirins bought in the chemists'.<sup>16</sup>

The team reported back to Lindemann a few months later. The conclusion, printed in large letters on the title page, was this:

**THERE IS NO EVIDENCE OF BREAKDOWN OF MORALE.**<sup>17</sup>

So what did Frederick Lindemann do with this unequivocal finding? He ignored it. Lindemann had already decided that strategic bombing was a sure bet, and mere facts were not about to change his mind.

And so the memo he sent to Churchill said something altogether different:

Investigation seems to show that having one's house demolished is most dangerous to morale. People seem to mind it more than having their friends or even relatives killed. At Hull, signs of strain were evident though only one-tenth of the homes were demolished. On the above

figures, we can do as much harm to each of the 58 principal German towns. There seems little doubt that this would break the spirit of the German people.<sup>18</sup>

Thus ended the debate over the efficacy of bombing. The whole episode had, as one historian later described it, the ‘perceptible smell of a witch hunt’.<sup>19</sup> Conscientious scientists who opposed the tactic of targeting German civilians were denounced as cowards, even traitors.

The bomb-mongers, meanwhile, felt the enemy needed to be dealt an even harsher blow. Churchill gave the signal and all hell broke loose over Germany. When the bombing finally ended, the casualties numbered ten times higher than after the Blitz. On one night in Dresden, more men, women and children were killed than in London during the whole war. More than half of Germany’s towns and cities were destroyed. The country had become one big heap of smouldering rubble.

All the while, only a small contingent of the Allied air force was actually striking strategic targets such as factories and bridges. Right up through the final months, Churchill maintained that the surest way to win the war was by dropping bombs on civilians to break national morale. In January 1944, a Royal Air Force memo gratifyingly affirmed this view: ‘The more we bomb, the more satisfactory the effect.’

The prime minister underlined these words using his famous red pen.<sup>20</sup>

So did the bombings have the intended effect?

Let me again start with an eyewitness account from a respected psychiatrist. Between May and July 1945, Dr Friedrich Panse interviewed almost a hundred Germans whose homes had been destroyed. ‘Afterward,’ said one, ‘I was really full of vim and lit up a cigar.’ The general mood following a raid, said another, was euphoric, ‘like after a war that has been won.’<sup>21</sup>

There was no sign of mass hysteria. On the contrary, in places that had just been hit, inhabitants felt relief. ‘Neighbours were wonderfully helpful,’

Panase recorded. 'Considering the severity and duration of the mental strain, the general attitude was remarkably steady and restrained.'<sup>22</sup>

Reports by the *Sicherheitsdienst*, which kept close tabs on the German population, convey a similar picture. After the raids, people helped each other out. They pulled victims from the rubble, they extinguished fires. Members of the Hitler Youth rushed around tending to the homeless and the injured. A grocer jokingly hung up a sign in front of his shop: DISASTER BUTTER SOLD HERE!<sup>23</sup>

(Okay, the British humour was better.)

Shortly after the German surrender in May 1945, a team of Allied economists visited the defeated nation, tasked by the US Department of Defense to study the effects of the bombing. Most of all, the Americans wanted to know if this tactic was a good way to win wars.

The scientists' findings were stark: the civilian bombings had been a fiasco. In fact, they appeared to have strengthened the German wartime economy, thereby prolonging the war. Between 1940 and 1944, they found that German tank production had multiplied by a factor of nine, and of fighter jets by a factor of *fourteen*.

A team of British economists reached the same conclusion.<sup>24</sup> In the twenty-one devastated towns and cities they investigated, production had increased faster than in a control group of fourteen cities that had not been bombed. 'We were beginning to see,' confessed one of the American economists, 'that we were encountering one of the greatest, perhaps the greatest miscalculation of the war.'<sup>25</sup>

What fascinates me most about this whole sorry affair is that the main actors all fell into the same trap.

Hitler and Churchill, Roosevelt and Lindemann – all of them signed on to psychologist Gustave Le Bon's claim that our state of civilisation is no more than skin deep. They were certain that air raids would blow this fragile covering to bits. But the more they bombed, the *thicker* it got. Seems it wasn't a thin membrane at all, but a callus.

Military experts, unfortunately, were slow to catch on. Twenty-five years later, US forces would drop three times as much firepower on Vietnam as they dropped in the entire Second World War.<sup>26</sup> This time it failed on an even grander scale. Even when the evidence is right in front of us, somehow we still manage to deny it. To this day, many remain convinced that the resilience the British people showed during the Blitz can be chalked up to a quality that is singularly British.

But it's not singularly British. It's universally human.

## 1

### A New Realism

1

This is a book about a radical idea.

An idea that's long been known to make rulers nervous. An idea denied by religions and ideologies, ignored by the news media and erased from the annals of world history.

At the same time, it's an idea that's legitimised by virtually every branch of science. One that's corroborated by evolution and confirmed by everyday life. An idea so intrinsic to human nature that it goes unnoticed and gets overlooked.

If only we had the courage to take it more seriously, it's an idea that might just start a revolution. Turn society on its head. Because once you grasp what it really means, it's nothing less than a mind-bending drug that ensures you'll never look at the world the same again

So what is this radical idea?

That most people, deep down, are pretty decent.

I don't know anyone who explains this idea better than Tom Postmes, professor of social psychology at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. For years, he's been asking students the same question.

Imagine an airplane makes an emergency landing and breaks into three parts. As the cabin fills with smoke, everybody inside realises: We've got to get out of here. What happens?

- On Planet A, the passengers turn to their neighbours to ask if they're okay. Those needing assistance are helped out of the plane first. People are willing to give their lives, even for perfect strangers.
- On Planet B, everyone's left to fend for themselves. Panic breaks out. There's lots of pushing and shoving. Children, the elderly, and people with disabilities get trampled underfoot.

Now the question: Which planet do we live on?

'I would estimate about 97 per cent of people think we live on Planet B,' says Professor Postmes. 'The truth is, in almost every case, we live on Planet A.'<sup>1</sup>

Doesn't matter who you ask. Left wing or right, rich or poor, uneducated or well read – all make the same error of judgement. 'They don't know. Not freshman or juniors or grad students, not professionals in most cases, not even emergency responders,' Postmes laments. 'And it's not for a lack of research. We've had this information available to us since World War II.'

Even history's most momentous disasters have played out on Planet A. Take the sinking of the *Titanic*. If you saw the movie, you probably think everybody was blinded by panic (except the string quartet). In fact, the evacuation was quite orderly. One eyewitness recalled that 'there was no indication of panic or hysteria, no cries of fear, and no running to and fro'.<sup>2</sup>

Or take the September 11 2001 terrorist attacks. As the Twin Towers burned, thousands of people descended the stairs calmly, even though they



knew their lives were in danger. They stepped aside for firefighters and the injured. ‘And people would actually say: “No, no, you first,”’ one survivor later reported. ‘I couldn’t believe it, that at this point people would actually say “No, no, please take my place.” It was uncanny.’<sup>3</sup>

There is a persistent myth that by their very nature humans are selfish, aggressive and quick to panic. It’s what Dutch biologist Frans de Waal likes to call *veneer theory*: the notion that civilisation is nothing more than a thin veneer that will crack at the merest provocation.<sup>4</sup> In actuality, the opposite is true. It’s when crisis hits – when the bombs fall or the floodwaters rise – that we humans become our best selves.

On 29 August 2005, Hurricane Katrina tore over New Orleans. The levees and flood walls that were supposed to protect the city failed. In the wake of the storm, 80 per cent of area homes flooded and at least 1,836 people lost their lives. It was one of the most devastating natural disasters in US history.

That whole week newspapers were filled with accounts of rapes and shootings across New Orleans. There were terrifying reports of roving gangs, lootings and of a sniper taking aim at rescue helicopters. Inside the Superdome, which served as the city’s largest storm shelter, some 25,000 people were packed in together, with no electricity and no water. Two infants’ throats had been slit, journalists reported, and a seven-year-old had been raped and murdered.<sup>5</sup>

The chief of police said the city was slipping into anarchy, and the governor of Louisiana feared the same. ‘What angers me the most,’ she said, ‘is that disasters like this often bring out the worst in people.’<sup>6</sup>

This conclusion went viral. In the British newspaper the *Guardian*, acclaimed historian Timothy Garton Ash articulated what so many were thinking: ‘Remove the elementary staples of organised, civilised life – food, shelter, drinkable water, minimal personal security – and we go back within hours to a Hobbesian state of nature, a war of all against all. [...] A few become temporary angels, most revert to being apes.’

There it was again, in all its glory: veneer theory. New Orleans, according to Garton Ash, had opened a small hole in ‘the thin crust we lay across the seething magma of nature, including human nature’.<sup>7</sup>

It wasn’t until months later, when the journalists cleared out, the floodwaters drained away and the columnists moved on to their next opinion, that researchers uncovered what had really happened in New Orleans.

What sounded like gunfire had actually been a popping relief valve on a gas tank. In the Superdome, six people had died: four of natural causes, one from an overdose and one by suicide. The police chief was forced to concede that he couldn’t point to a single officially reported rape or murder. True, there had been looting, but mostly by groups that had teamed up to survive, in some cases even banding with police.<sup>8</sup>

Researchers from the Disaster Research Center at the University of Delaware concluded that ‘the overwhelming majority of the emergent activity was prosocial in nature’.<sup>9</sup> A veritable armada of boats from as far away as Texas came to save people from the rising waters. Hundreds of civilians formed rescue squads, like the self-styled Robin Hood Looters – a group of eleven friends who went around looking for food, clothing and medicine and then handing it out to those in need.<sup>10</sup>

Katrina, in short, didn’t see New Orleans overrun with self-interest and anarchy. Rather, the city was inundated with courage and charity.

The hurricane confirmed the science on how human beings respond to disasters. Contrary to what we normally see in the movies, the Disaster Research Center at the University of Delaware has established that in nearly seven hundred field studies since 1963, there’s never total mayhem. It’s never every man for himself. Crime – murder, burglary, rape – usually drops. People don’t go into shock, they stay calm and spring into action. ‘Whatever the extent of the looting,’ a disaster researcher points out, ‘it always pales in significance to the widespread altruism that leads to free and massive giving and sharing of goods and services.’<sup>11</sup>

Catastrophes bring out the best in people. I know of no other sociological finding that's backed by so much solid evidence that's so blithely ignored. The picture we're fed by the media is consistently the opposite of what happens when disaster strikes.

Meanwhile, back in New Orleans, all those persistent rumours were costing lives.

Unwilling to venture into the city unprotected, emergency responders were slow to mobilise. The National Guard was called in, and at the height of the operation some 72,000 troops were in place. 'These troops know how to shoot and kill,' said the governor, 'and I expect they will.'<sup>12</sup>

And so they did. On Danziger Bridge on the city's east side, police opened fire on six innocent, unarmed black residents, killing a seventeen-year-old boy and a mentally disabled man of forty (five of the officers involved were later sentenced to lengthy prison terms).<sup>13</sup>

True, the disaster in New Orleans was an extreme case. But the dynamic during disasters is almost always the same: adversity strikes and there's a wave of spontaneous cooperation in response, then the authorities panic and unleash a second disaster.

'My own impression,' writes Rebecca Solnit, whose book *A Paradise Built in Hell* (2009) gives a masterful account of Katrina's aftermath, 'is that elite panic comes from powerful people who see all humanity in their own image.'<sup>14</sup> Dictators and despots, governors and generals – they all too often resort to brute force to prevent scenarios that exist only in their own heads, on the assumption that the average Joe is ruled by self-interest, just like them.

2

In the summer of 1999, at a small school in the Belgian town of Bornem, nine children came down with a mysterious illness. They'd come to school

that morning with no symptoms; after lunch they were all ill. Headaches. Vomiting. Palpitations. Casting about for an explanation, the only thing the teachers could think of was the Coca-Cola the nine had drunk during break.

It didn't take long for journalists to get wind of the story. Over at Coca-Cola headquarters, the phones started ringing. That same evening the company issued a press release stating that millions of bottles were being recalled from Belgian store shelves. 'We are searching frantically and hope to have a definitive answer in the next few days,' said a spokeswoman.<sup>15</sup>

But it was too late. The symptoms had spread through Belgium and jumped the border into France. Pale, limp kids were being rushed off in ambulances. Within days, suspicion had spread to all Coca-Cola products. Fanta, Sprite, Nester, Aquarius . . . they all seemed a danger to children. The 'Coca-Cola Incident' was one of the worst financial blows in the company's 107-year history, forcing it to recall seventeen million cases of soft drinks in Belgium and destroy its warehoused stock.<sup>16</sup> In the end, the cost was more than 200 million dollars.<sup>17</sup>

Then something odd happened. A few weeks later, the toxicologists issued their lab report. What had they found after running their tests on the cans of Coke? Nothing. No pesticides. No pathogens. No toxic metals. Nada. And their tests on the blood and urine samples from hundreds of patients? Zilch. The scientists were unable to find a single chemical cause for the severe symptoms which by that time had been documented in more than a thousand boys and girls.

'Those kids really were sick, there's no doubt about that,' said one of the researchers. 'But not from drinking a Coke.'<sup>18</sup>

The Coca-Cola incident speaks to an age-old philosophical question.

What is truth?

Some things are true whether you believe in them or not. Water boils at 100°C. Smoking kills. President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas on 22 November 1963.