

Hans Rosling: Factfulness

Sub-Title:

Ten Reasons We're Wrong About The World – And Why Things Are Better Than You Think.

Normally, we do not provide book reviews because most books carry either a hidden or even outspoken agenda. We are not in the business of spreading anybody's philosophy, ideology or conviction.

The reviewed book is a rare exception: it is an eye-opener in teaching the reader in

- How to interpret facts and
- In special, how not to be trapped by one's own shortcomings leading to misinterpretations

Other comments see it the same way – just one for many:

(This book is) "an assault both on ignorance and pessimism" – The Times

Short biography: (327f – the numbers in brackets refer to the original quotations of the book)

Born in Uppsala, Sweden, in 1948, studied statistics and medicine in Uppsala and public health in Bangalore, qualifying as a doctor in 1976. From 1979 to 1981, district medical officer in Nacala, Mozambique. From 1997, professor of International Health at Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm.

In 2005, Hans Rosling co-founded the Gapminder Foundation with his son Ola and daughter-in-law Anna (both co-authors of the book discussed), with a mission to fight devastating ignorance with a fact-based worldview that everyone can understand.

On his crusade for better understanding of the world, Hans was adviser to many international organizations and agencies and listed as one of the leading global thinkers in the world.

Hans died on February 7, 2017.

In a very colourful language, Rosling demonstrates over and over again how people are not only devastatingly wrong, but systematically wrong – in many assumptions going beyond their daily and direct experience. He explains in detail the reasons for an "overdramatic worldview" (13),

And he offers "**data as therapy**" against "being constantly stressed about the wrong things" (16).

This book is a great crusade against today's alarmism and – in consequence – against the gradual reduction of individual freedom and civil liberties caused by demagogic fearmongers and the political manipulators using them.

It also helps in discovering all the little tricks used to manipulate us in everyday life through numbers.

In ten chapters, Rosling describes the **ten basic instincts that prevent clear thinking and unbiased recognition of facts** – one by one. Here is not the space to deal with each single one. It will be left to the reader to enjoy the very vivid descriptions and the surprises when discovering one's own pitfalls.

He is constantly calling for a **multi-level framework** replacing the overdramatic "divided" worldview by data. Whenever you compare averages, check the spreads. Then you will see the overlaps, and the gap has possibly disappeared. (46)

Just one very striking example of misconception: the connection between religion and babies per woman. Rosling shows that this connection is not so impressive. The single factor that does have a strong connection with large families is: extreme poverty! (89)

As the sub-title proves, Rosling is a shining example of positive thinking. While he knows from his surveys that "the majority of people think the world is getting worse" (51), he tirelessly points to "the secret silent miracle of human progress", with "billions of improvements that are never reported".

Human ingenuity always found a way to battle negative impacts, it will also find a way to cope with digital caging intended for mankind by power-drunken regimes.

Rosling has foreseen this trend, too. He describes the fears that are "hardwired deep in our brains for obvious evolutionary reasons", one of the major ones being "contamination by invisible substances that can infect of poison us". (105) "Intellectual capacity is blocked by fear and sorrow" (111).

"Frightening" and "dangerous" are two different things. Something frightening poses a perceived risk. Something dangerous poses a real risk. ... Paying too much attention to fear ... creates a tragic drainage of energy in the wrong directions." (122)

One of his wise quotes: "**Avoid lonely numbers.** Never believe that one number on its own can be meaningful." (130) More of the same: "A lonely number always makes me suspicious that I will misinterpret it." (139) "Amounts and rates can tell very different stories. ... In particular, look for rates per person when comparing between countries or regions." (143)

Rosling suggests five powerful ways to keep questioning your favourite categories:

- Look for differences within and similarities across groups
- Beware of "the majority"
- Beware of exceptional examples
- Assume you are not "normal"
- Beware of generalizing from one group to another (158)

"I never take it for granted that brilliant experts will know anything about closely related fields outside their specializations." (188) "Many activists present themselves as experts." (188)

"Almost every activist I have ever met, either deliberately or, more likely, unknowingly, exaggerates the problem to which they have dedicated themselves." (189)

One of Rosling's core beliefs: "The end goal of economic growth is individual freedom and culture." (192) He would rot in his grave when he would have to witness that within a short time, digital caging and destruction of culture and civil liberties have become the prime agenda of ruling classes – many of them having been careful listeners to his speeches but turning their skills against progress of mankind.

The "instinct to find a guilty party derails our ability to develop a true, fact-based understanding of the world. To understand most of the world's significant problems we have to look beyond a guilty individual and to the system." (207)

"Only in a few countries, with exceptionally destructive leaders and conflicts, has social and economic development been halted. ... It must make one ask if the leaders are that important. And the answer, probably, is no. It's the people, the many, who build a society." (218)

"Resist blaming any one individual or group. (221) Recognize when a scapegoat is being used. Look for causes, not villains. Look for systems, not heroes." (222)

From today's point of view, Rosling's comments on the urgency instinct seem to be like a screenplay of the actual pandemic. His original intention was to warn of those "deliberately triggering your urgency instinct. The call to action makes you think less critically, decide more quickly, and act now." (228) "The constant alarms make us numb to real urgency." It "blocks us from thinking analytically." (229)

"We should not pick the most dramatic estimates and show a worst case scenario as if it were certain." "Stop scaring people with unlikely scenarios." (231)

"Sometimes the most useful action you can take is to improve the data." (232)

It is a pity that he cannot see how greedy power brokers try to reverse his prevision: "The race to end extreme poverty has been a marathon, with the starter gun fired in 1800. This next generation has the unique opportunity to complete the job." (241) Well, we will see whether ruling regimes will follow that path or continue with the actual path of mass destruction.

His conclusions – though so simple - are more up-to-date than ever before:

- Only relevant and accurate data is useful.
- Beware of fortune-tellers.
- Be wary of drastic action. Ask what the side effects will be. Ask how the idea has been tested. (242)

"Teaching our children the basic Factfulness rules of thumb would protect the next generation from a lot of ignorance." (248) Just let me choose **two of his ten rules of thumb**:

- "We should be teaching them that cultural and religious stereotypes are useless for understanding the world."
- "We should be teaching them the common ways that people will try to trick them with numbers."

"Most important of all, we should be teaching our children humility and curiosity." (249)

Rosling also puts **certain influencers in correct perspective**:

"Journalists, activists, and politicians are also humans. They are not lying to us. They suffer from a dramatic worldview themselves." (252) "Ultimately, it is not journalists' role, and it is not the goal of activists or politicians, to present the world as it really is. They will always have to compete to engage our attention with exciting stories and dramatic narratives." (253)

"Fears that once helped keep ancestors alive, today help keep journalists employed." (107)

"Instead it is up to us as consumers to learn how to consume news more factfully, and **to realize that the news is not very useful for understanding the world.**" (253)

At any times, and in many places around the globe, regimes try to manipulate their subjects with the way they present facts – before they resort to their final resource, sheer physical power or coercion.

Books like "Factfulness" are a thorn in the eye of regimes.

*Try to get a specimen before it is put on the Index of Forbidden Works – and hide it well,
for the sake of yourself and your children.**

Hans Rosling – Factfulness – ISBN Number 978 1 473 63749 8

*) For clarification:

- We have no economic interest in the sale of the book "Factfulness" – neither directly nor indirectly.
- The above article is a two times abbreviated version. In case of interest in a slightly broader summary (5 pages instead of 2), please, send us a short note.

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