

BOOK REVIEW

FACTFULNESS

(Hans Rosling with Ola Rosling and Anna Rosling Ronnmund. Sceptre. 2018. Pp.342. Hardcover. INR 499)

Annabhula J.C. Bose*

According to the authors, the world is getting better. But according to Vandana Shiva, the world is getting worse.

Vandana Shiva's latest book "Oneness vs. the 1%" refers to the widespread poverty and malnutrition, an alarming refugee crisis, social unrest, and economic polarization as our lived reality as the top 1% of the world population pushes the planet and all its people to the social and ecological brink.

The authors claim themselves to be possessing a fact-based worldview, and not an overdramatic worldview based on negative instincts. Vandana Shiva too claims to be overwhelmingly based on "little-known explosive facts".

So, with claims to factfulness on both positive and negative sides, how can we take stock of the situation? It is not an easy task.

According to Bill Gates, this is "one of the most educational books I've ever read", and so he had arranged to give free copies of it to college students in the US. But the book has come under heavy fire as well from its direct critics that it has selectively portrayed a biased, one-sided happy view of the world, and that Bill Gates should instead have arranged to deliver free to the American students copies of the last two references mentioned below!

* Department of Economics, Shri Ram College of Commerce, Delhi. Email: ajc.bose@srcc.du.ac.in

The authors have this piece of actionable advice: “If you want your children to grow up to respect factfulness, teach them what the past was really like, including the bad parts. They should also be taught how to recognize useless stereotypes and how to hold two seemingly competing views at once, such as, there is pain and suffering in the world, but things are getting better for a lot of people. Also, teach them how to consume news by showing them how to recognize when the news is being overdramatic and encouraging them not to feel too anxious or hopeless.”

The key message underscoring this advice that also summarises the book is as follows: “Factfulness is in short supply these days thanks to some basic yet major misconceptions and the fact that our very human instincts can sometimes work against our own interests. While a great many people are living under the belief that the world has gotten worse, the fact is that it's gotten a whole lot better in an incredibly short amount of time. In just about every single measurable category, life is better now than it was 200, 100 or even 50 years ago. People are living longer, there's more access to health care and education and there's far less poverty. Recognising this takes looking beyond your one news channel and accessing the real facts and putting them into context.”

There are six key ideas behind the above message as follows. First, we do not see the world accurately because megamiskonceptions like the East-vs-West divide or the developed world vs. the developing world prevent us from doing so. Secondly, positives are overlooked as a result of our negativity instinct which leads to the misconception that the world is going to dogs. We human beings are wired to focus on the bad. Thirdly, our fear and size instincts, as well as our straight-line instinct, also contribute to our skewed understanding of the world. Actually, the facts are such that we should not be worried about never-ending population growth/overpopulation, and yet, we do worry because of our fear and size instincts. We have fear instinct because being afraid can keep us safe from threats and our size instinct leads us to overestimate the dangers that our fear instinct creates for us. The straight line instinct fails us to recognize a variable peaking. Fourthly, people tend to over-generalize and mistakenly think certain outcomes are unavoidable. Fifthly, to

see the world accurately, people need to take in multiple perspectives and avoid casting blame on individuals or groups. And sixthly, avoid making rash decisions and exaggerations, and stick to the facts in education, business and journalism.

The attack from the direct critics of the authors of this book is, in a nutshell, as follows. The book “actually employs a biased selection of variables, avoids analysis of negative trends, and does not discuss any of the serious challenges related to continual population growth. A policy based on the simplistic worldview presented in *Factfulness* could have serious consequences.” This criticism is distilled in four points: “1. The authors exhibit unbalanced optimism. World development is depicted using only positive trends and graphs; 2. There is a lack of interest in the material preconditions and ecological consequences of the current techno-economic trajectory and its global diffusion, which the authors tend to extrapolate without qualifications; 3. The authors take a cavalier attitude toward the continued global population increase, which is portrayed as both unproblematic and almost impossible to influence. As a result, they devote very little space to investments in family planning; and 4. There is no discussion of migratory flows, their relationship to population growth, or the need for more thoughtful policies.” The authors' selection of indicators and efforts to obfuscate contradictory evidence reduce the credibility of the book and its important positive statistics. The book extrapolates from historical statistics on global development. However, an intellectually credible analysis of global development cannot be built solely on a selection of positive facts that are extrapolated for the future. The book overlooks how increased inequality and growing numbers of superrich drive up resource consumption and make the transition to sustainable alternatives more difficult. It has also neglected the historical successes in family planning and how these could guide future efforts at containing population explosion which the book has failed to analyse without misleading. There are no ideas about long-term measures to address population and migration pressures.

To conclude, in light of the antagonistic views on the above lines taking stock of which is very difficult, I have taken the book with ambivalence even as I do recognize

the need “to avoid propagation of one-sided views and invite respected international researchers with different backgrounds to present and discuss multifaceted perspectives on global developments, positive trends as well as serious challenges, in a format that takes the audience seriously.”

Hans Rosling was a former professor of international health and had become an international superstar with his charisma via TED talks and positive messages, and this book as his posthumous gospel contains a collection of illustrative statistics and imaginative insights and has reached a global audience. But as his critics point out, his research production was meager and he had become what he called an “edutainer”, specializing in lectures that mixed shows with novel ways of displaying publicly available statistics. And most importantly, he was leery of entering into a dialogue that might reveal the weaknesses of his analysis.

So much on this famous book, its authors and its critics.

REFERENCES

<https://www.gatesnotes.com/Books/Factfulness>

<https://overpopulation-project.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/a-critical-review-of-rosling-and-factfulness-berggren-181012.pdf>

<https://overpopulation-project.com/factfulness-a-more-accurate-title-for-this-new-book-would-have-been-selecting-facts-to-make-you-happy/>

<https://www.nature.com/news/biodiversity-the-ravages-of-guns-nets-and-bulldozers-1.20381>

https://science.sciencemag.org/content/356/6335/260.full?casa_token=A82ZkGhZ_pYAAAAA:y0gSqcJuEZDV4hTV08uQpHKsojqQEyTimOSeDaFWGvF9YhlGAsD5UwjnC8bV1cyXJ1IwjCAVZb3XBUs