Book Review: *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong about the World – and Why Things are Better than you Think.*

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Rosling, Hans, Ola Rosling, and Anna Rosling Ronnlund. Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong About the World – and Why Things are Better than You Think. New York: Flatiron, 2018. Pp. 352, $17.99.

In *Factfulness*, Dr. Hans Rosling and his collaborators argue that most people misperceive trends around important topics like global poverty, inequality, health, and well-being. This misperception is not the province of less-educated "others" - highly educated Westerners are among those with the least accurate understandings of global poverty, development, and inequality trends (9-12) - nor are our misunderstandings random. Rather, they are nearly always in the direction of thinking "the world is more frightening, more violent, and more hopeless than it really is" (9). The authors argue that such misunderstanding is consequential: our ignorance of global gains in life expectancy, literacy, gender equality, economic development, peacefulness, and other indicators risks fomenting hopelessness and putting gains at risk. The authors set out to document various positive trends in the world, identify the factors that distort our ability to notice these trends, and make suggestions for developing a more accurate worldview that they believe will equip readers to understand and help build on positive trends of the past 200 years.

I encountered this book when my university selected it as the year's common reading for incoming students. I am excited to teach it as it effectively documents its most important claims and highlights skills of critical and evidence-based thinking. Far from being a call to inaction or passivity, *Factfulness* repeatedly notes that learning about social gains and how they have been achieved can fuel enthusiasm for continued activism and action (68-70, 190). Though some parts of the authors' positivity are excessive, especially around global environmental risks, even the work's flaws will serve as productive ground for discussion and learning.

The introduction, which is built around a short quiz and enables the authors to highlight some positive global trends, and the first two chapters are among the books' strongest sections. Also quickly engaging is the first chapter's use of a scatterplot which shows large gaps in child mortality between a few wealthy countries and all other countries (25) - immediately followed by noting that the prior graph showed data that is over fifty years old and showing in an updated graph that nearly all countries have dramatically reduced child deaths (26). The once-simple binary here is now a much tighter continuum. Rosling et al. springboard from this example to develop the argument that seeing the world solely through a rich country/poor country binary is outdated and unproductive; they propose an alternative framework using four tiers of development (pp. 32-39) that they argue allows us to better see where and how change in human well-being has occurred. Most people in most countries, they argue, now live on Tiers 2 and 3 of well-being, rather than at the extremes.

The authors then move in Chapter 2, "The Negativity Bias," to tracking global changes over the last half-century in well-being, poverty, and development. They note that extreme poverty has plummeted while life expectancy has more than doubled in the past century and present an array of charts (pp. 60-64) documenting large global declines in legal slavery, child mortality, child labor, disease, and hunger, and increases in clean water availability, literacy, vaccination, and women's rights, among other trends. They argue that progress is obscured by inaccurate nostalgia for mythologized pasts (think of "Make America Great Again!," or even of narratives about the death of 1950s-style American community that held sway in sociology's very recent past), media and activists' accentuation of crises over progress, and our tendency to incorrectly conflate noticing positive developments with not caring about ongoing problems (68). They suggest several ways that readers might counteract these tendencies.

The next two chapters address "The Straight Line Instinct" and "The Fear Instinct." Here the authors argue that we are frequently captivated by exaggerated fears of dying dramatically in "natural disasters (0.1 percent of all deaths), plane crashes (0.001 percent), murders (0.7 percent), nuclear leaks (0 percent), and terrorism (0.05 percent)" (122). "The Fear Instinct" dovetails nicely with later sections on "The Blame Instinct" and the "Urgency Instinct." These chapters could fuel class discussions on the steep costs of the early-2000s panic over terrorism or the incorrect tendency of Americans during the 1990s and 2000s to see crime as skyrocketing, even as it steeply dropped.

The book's fifth chapter, "The Size Instinct," argues that we are easily deceived by numbers or cases pulled out of context and need to think comparatively to take effective action. For instance, the authors write persuasively about how Rosling, when working in Mozambique, surveyed child deaths outside his hospital rather than solely focusing on patients in the hospital and how this assessment led him to reallocate resources toward preventive interventions that ultimately saved more lives. The following chapter on "The Generalization Instinct" argues that questioning our mental models of the world is necessary and productive and that global travel can help reduce inaccurate stereotyping if it includes sufficient contact with locals. The authors also suggest a tool for learning about living conditions in different countries called Dollar Street (www.dollarstreet.org), which will work well in classes that use this volume. This chapter might also tie into instructors highlighting differences between solid generalizations, which are evidence-based and recognize variation, and harmful stereotypes, which are overly sweeping or sloppy and often essentialist. Of the remaining chapters, the strongest are "The Single Perspective Instinct," which notes the risks of relying exclusively on one type of evidence, one set of experts, or one ideological perspective, and counsels ongoing self-questioning, and "Factfulness in Practice," the authors' concluding thoughts on avoiding the biases they document.

I see *Factfulness* as a useful teaching tool for two main reasons. First, it is simultaneously strong in its coverage of global poverty and human development and in its emphasis on using scientific and social scientific thinking to combat cognitive biases. College students who have not thought much about global poverty or inequality will gain in awareness of their privilege, while more advanced students will gain understanding of the world beyond the starkest extremes. Both groups stand to benefit from how the book interweaves noting biases and arguing that we should think more systematically with gripping examples of why these points matter. The book is infused with connections to active learning tools including Gapminder (www.gapminder.org) and Dollar Street. I also found myself jotting down several discussion questions per chapter as I read.

Second, this book is well-suited for 2020s America. At a cultural moment when many Americans see the future as bleak (Parker, Morin, and Horowitz 2019; Schonfeld 2022) and when hopelessness and depression among US college students is at historic highs (Colarossi 2022), the book is indeed "data as therapy" (16) – not of the superficial and quick-fix variety, but rather of the kind that empowers its readers to see the world more clearly and act in constructive ways.

While sociology has long focused mostly on negative trends (Gelman 2018, Rojas 2018), overstated negativity carries significant costs, perhaps now more than ever. As Rosling et al. write in the context of applauding global activism on gender equality in primary education, "Everything is not fine. But it is just as ridiculous, and just as stressful, to look away from the progress that has been made. When people wrongly believe that nothing is improving, they may conclude that nothing we have tried so far is working and lose confidence in measures that work. [Progress] won't happen by itself, and if we lose hope because of stupid misconceptions, it might not happen at all" (68-70).

This does not mean that students should only hear about positive trends. And this is one place where *Factfulness* falls short: the book nearly-exclusively highlights positive developments. Global warming, climate change, and species extinction are undeniably among the most significant global trends of the past century but are only briefly considered (but see 232-34 and 239-40) or too quickly dismissed. While space precludes extensive discussion here of how this impacts Rosling's analysis, interested readers might refer to Berggren (2018) for further discussion. Similarly, the worrisome 21st Century trend of democratic backsliding (Klein 2020; Fisher 2022) is absent from the work.

That said, I see *Factfulness* as valuable in drawing students' attention to the myriad ways in which a narrative of a beleaguered humanity in ever-worsening poverty and suffering is badly distorted and probably counterproductive. And thoughtful teaching can effectively incorporate and address points on which the authors' view is excessively rosy. For instance, assigning Berggren's criticism along with the book could generate useful conversation about how we should select indicators of human well-being, or about the costs and benefits of over-emphasizing either negative or positive trends. I also see potential synergies in tying *Factfulness* into discussions of how warped nostalgia and declinism have fueled right-wing, racist, and ultranationalist movements, or in using the work in conjunction with work on effective altruism, such as Peter Singer's The Life You Can Save, on how social scientific methods can help us better understand which aid organizations are most effective at reducing global suffering and death. For these reasons, I recommend reading and teaching this book.

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