

Liberal Read

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What Made Humanity's success?

BOOK REVIEW

Johan Norberg

*Open: The Story of Human Progress:
How Collaboration and Curiosity
Shaped Humankind*

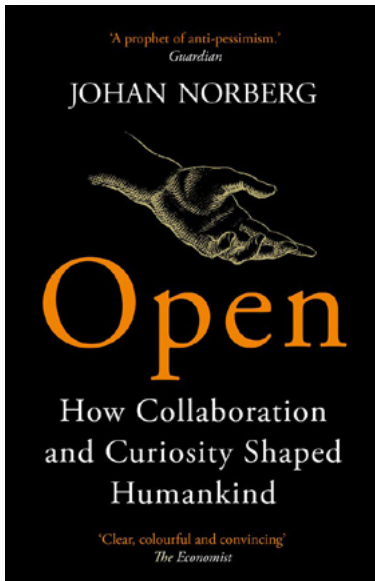
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By Adam Mazik

A series of crises has put many liberal ideas under question. Inspired by a popular commercial concept, Liberal Reads are packaged in an easily accessible format that provides key insights in 30 minutes or less. The aim of Liberal Reads is to revisit and rethink classical works that have defined liberalism in the past, but also to introduce more recent books that drive the debate around Europe's oldest political ideology. Liberal Reads may also engage critically with other important political, philosophical and economic books through a liberal lens. Ideological discussions have their objective limits, but they can still improve our understanding of current social and economic conditions and give a much needed sense of direction when looking for policy solutions in real life problems.

Liberal Read

What Made Humanity's success?



Introduction: What is open?

Johan Norberg makes a strong statement: every single time when societies and people have experienced an increase of wealth, innovations, and living standards, the reason was a broadly understood 'openness', of course, relative to the specific time.

By openness, the Swede means openness towards trade, immigration, and the exchange and expression of different ideas. Analysing evidence from the 300,000-year history of Homo sapiens, he comes to the conclusion that every time those factors came together, the result was a remarkable explosion of wealth.

The lesson is this: the Western world does not have a patent on economic growth, openness, and tolerance. As Norberg shows, periods of wealth and relative freedom have appeared in different times and different cultures. And for a very long time, Europe has not been a very good example of the values that we today would describe as liberal.

The second lesson is more painful: All those past enrichments ended. Wars, conflicts and political decisions in the past were able to destroy the fundamentals and results of those dynamic populations. Each period of 'openness' and progress gave way to a time of 'closing down' and regress, a return to traditional(-ist) values and isolation from the rest of the world.

Each time ... except ...this time?

The author analyses the reasons for such traditionalist and nativist backlashes and traces them back to our evolution. He explains the mechanisms that make us both cooperative traders and aggressive tribalists, as well as the aspects that amplify those negative parts of our nature. The book, therefore, isn't just an explanation, but also a warning and a roadmap for a better future.

Contrary to the approach in the book, I believe the best way forward for this short summary is to work chronologically and to demonstrate how, according to Norberg, in different times the three different elements of openness have collectively led to periods of progress, wealth, and enlightenment. The book is full of examples and, of course, it won't be possible to explain or even name all of them. Therefore I urge the readers to invest some money and to engage in the open exchange (perhaps by looking for the best

possible offer) that Norberg praises, by buying his book. I promise that the transaction will be mutually beneficial for both parties. Additionally, if read with an open mind (pun intended), positive external effects are guaranteed.

Open success stories

The Phoenicians¹

The first globalists, as the Swedish scholar calls them, arguably were the Phoenicians with their impressive system of merchant cities. After the 'late bronze age collapse' of the twelfth century BC, they were able to establish themselves as the most advanced civilization. Contrary to past dominant cultures, they didn't derive their wealth and power from wars, enslavement, and looting of other peoples, but from ... trade. They became famous for their industry and entrepreneurship, and introduced many innovations into sea travel and trade. They standardised ship-building, making them more spacious and stable, and were the first to use the North Star as a navigation tool. Powered by this, they created a new network of traders across the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, with Phoenician city-states in North Africa and in the western Mediterranean regions.

Norberg emphasises that the Phoenicians were not just traders, but also middlemen across different trading cultures. He emphasises their willingness to learn and profit from the inventions of other states and cities, combining them into new innovations: they indeed were the first globalists.

The impact of the Phoenicians cannot be understated. They revolutionised the world with new inventions and openness to ideas that they acquired via trade with their network. They innovated and excelled in all the fields in which they participated, because they were not afraid to try and adopt novelty.

The professional traders had a profound influence on the Greeks and Romans by thoroughly influencing their politics, architecture, and culture. To be able to communicate with others, they further developed writing, making it less complex, which the Greeks and Romans then used to create their alphabets. And even though neither were traders by heart, they soon had to adopt their Middle Eastern predecessors' ways – it was undeniable that trade lead to wealth and progress.

Achaemenid Persians² and Greeks³

Another great civilisation that Norberg mentions is Achaemenid Persia, founded by Cyrus the Great in the mid-sixth century BC. According to the author, the reason for the Achaemenid's success was their 'strategic tolerance'. The Persian rulers at that time didn't subject the populations of conquered regions to slavery or try to impose their system of government and values. Instead, they tried to keep the structures of those populations in place, allowing the people to practise their customs and religions.

1 Norberg, p.43-46.

2 Norberg, p.86-87.

3 Norberg, p.87-89.

Alexander continued the tolerant tradition. After each of his military achievements, he made sure to not only preserve the social structures of the conquered countries, but also adopt many of the customs of the defeated, such as sacrificing to their gods and wearing their clothes.

The Persians were smart enough to understand that through this approach they could profit from different ideas and traditions, as well as from the talents and inventions, of very different cultures and peoples, such as the Phoenicians, Greeks, and Babylonians. Speaking of Babylon, when the Persians conquered the city, their emperor Cyrus displayed a remarkable level of strategic tolerance (and public relations skill), claiming that he triumphed on behalf of the local God 'Marduk' and promising to bring back religious freedom and peace. Although, as Norberg admits, it is impossible to know how much of this is political propaganda, the 'press release' does display an understanding of the strategic tolerance used by many of the powerful empires used as examples in the book.

Once again however the enlightenment ended. After the fourth century BC, the Persians abandoned this approach, effectively ending the era of Persian dominance.

Nature, however, does not tolerate voids, and the Macedonians, led by Alexander the Great, were

ready to take the place of the Persians. Alexander continued the tolerant tradition. After each of his military achievements, he made sure to not only preserve the social structures of the conquered countries, but also adopt many of the customs of the defeated, such as sacrificing to their gods and wearing their clothes. One of the examples that Norberg presents is the mass wedding that the Macedonian emperor organised, in which he and his military leaders married local brides from prominent Persian families. Alexander tried to retain as much of the structure that the Persians had left him, and benefited from all the different national and ethnic groups in the empire: as Norberg writes, Greeks, Phoenicians, Cypriots, and Egyptians were an integral part of Alexander's navy, while Persians, Bactrians, Parthians, and others worked in the cavalry.

After Alexander's early death, however, this cosmopolitan project came to an abrupt end. All but one of his military leaders 'divorced' their Persian wives, showing once again that while immensely beneficial, openness and freedom are very fragile.

Pax Romana⁴

The Hellenistic period influenced another globalist empire: the Romans. Like Alexander, they too continued the Persian example. The polytheist Romans quickly accepted the customs, Gods, and social structures of their conquered provinces, understanding the importance of social order and cooperation. The exceptions, of course, were the monotheistic religions with their different understanding of religion.

⁴ Norberg, p.47-50; p.89-94.

As Norberg argues, one of the Romans' political innovations was the more extensive freedom of movement given to immigrants and the defeated, as well as institutional tolerance, which even allowed the conquered to run for public office. The author lists many examples of such successes: Trajan and Hadrian, both emperors, were born close to Seville in Spain; Hadrian's successor, Antoninus Pius, had Gallic origins; Marcus Aurelius, from southern Spain. Pertinax, another emperor, was the son of a freed slave!

Norberg notes how the understanding of the Roman identity was different from others. To be 'Roman' did not mean to be born in Rome; it had nothing to do with the fascist and ethno-chauvinist concept of 'blood and soil'. It was instead a cultural and political identity. Norberg compares this understanding of 'national identity' to the American identity – a uniquely cosmopolitan and inclusive understanding even in today's world. The Romans had an impressively modern approach to the concept of citizenship, using it as a tool for assimilation, granting large groups of people the possibility to take part in political and economic life, thus giving them the chance to prosper, which further facilitated the interplay of cultures, as well as the order and stability of the empire. After the civil war between 91 and 88 BC, every inhabitant who was not a slave became a citizen.

The Roman tolerance and openness to immigrants and difference wasn't the cause of their fall, but rather the reason for their prosperity and glory. Immigrants and different nationalities played an important role in Rome's economic, intellectual, and political life. They became scholars, public servants and merchants; they even served in the Roman military. Immigration and tolerance are what made Rome, not what destroyed it.

On the contrary, the beginnings of the deterioration can be traced to Christianity, with its (for that time) exclusive political inclinations. Unfortunately, the persecutions that early Christians had to suffer didn't teach the later ones empathy. As soon as Christianity became the official state religion under Constantine, Christians assumed the role of oppressor.

As Norberg eloquently argues, the abandonment of strategic tolerance dissolved the glue that had held the empire together. The persecutions and intolerance led to riots, wars and conflicts, and created enemies where partnership and cooperation used to rule. The persecuted forged alliances that eventually led to the fall of both the western and eastern empires.

Luckily there is more to the world than Europe

The end of Rome pushed Europe into darkness. The historical evidence shows a disastrous decrease in living standards, trade and technology, and literacy and science, across professions and classes.⁵ The once economically and culturally dominant Europe, like many other examples in history, chose the path of intolerance and destruction. The evidence is quite drastic: Norberg cites research analysing the pollutant emissions (mainly lead) in the ice core, which indicate economic activity. According to this data, the emissions started to rise around 900 BC, when Phoenicians started to gain momentum. The levels peaked in the first and second centuries of 'Pax Romana'. After the Roman

⁵ Norberg, p.94.

empire fell, the same levels would not be reached for another 500 years⁶

The irrational intolerance of European countries did not end on the issues of immigration and religion. It wasn't just wealth that was destroyed – but the majority of our common human heritage⁷. Works of pagan Greek and Roman philosophers were destroyed, sometimes in a deliberate attempt to enforce the now dominant ideological orthodoxy of the Christian elites in the Church and among the secular authorities, and sometimes simply because of the lack of technology – we had lost the ability to produce paper cheaply and to preserve it. Europeans mainly used animal skins, which were used multiple times. It is impossible to guess how many works have been lost, but the following example should make you shiver: A fifth-century anthology of the best prose and poetry of the ancient world shows 1,430 quotations. Now guess how much of these have been lost. Some 1,115⁸! Let that sink in for a second. As Norberg claims, it is estimated that 90 per cent of classical literature has been lost. *Ninety per cent*. The damage to philosophy, natural sciences, medicine, and literature is immeasurable. The Great Vanishing is one of the biggest intellectual tragedies in world history, and Europe has to take the blame⁹.

At that point in history, the Muslim world was the most cosmopolitan and open civilisation. Its system allowed the greatest freedom of speech, which facilitated the open exchange of ideas.

Islam as the teacher of Europe

Humanity, however, was lucky. After Europe decided to cut its wings, other empires were able to uphold civilisation: the Muslim world, the Chinese, and the Mongols. Given the modern political situation, this might come as a surprise to some of the listeners. But it is true: as Norberg explains, between the eighth and twelfth centuries, Islam became Europe's teacher¹⁰.

At that point in history, the Muslim world was the most cosmopolitan and open civilisation. Its system allowed the greatest freedom of speech, which facilitated the open exchange of ideas. Relative to other cultures, the Muslim world also allowed a much higher degree of religious freedom. Islamic cities like Baghdad could be compared to today's

metropolises such as London or New York. Scholars and merchants of different religions came from all over the world and enriched public discourse, as well as the economic and scientific spheres of the empire. It was the Islamic world that created the first precursors of universities. Norberg names Al-Karaouine in Morocco, which was founded in 859 by a woman from a merchant family – something that would remain impossible in Europe for hundreds of years to come.

⁶ J.R. McConnell et al., Lead Pollution recorded in Greenland ice indicates European emissions tracked plagues, wars, and imperial expansion during antiquity, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 115 (22), 2018; Norberg p.49.

⁷ Norberg, p.132-135.

⁸ S. Greenbart, *The Swerve: How the world became modern*. New York, W.W Norton & Company, 2011, ch.4; Norberg, p.135.

⁹ Norberg, p.134-135.

¹⁰ Norberg, p.136-139.

The fact that the Islamic world drew from all sorts of different sources is well documented in some terms and expressions of everyday language. The revolutionary introduction of Arabic numerals, according to Norberg, is said to be attributed to Pope Sylvester II, who brought them from Al-Karaouine. However, the system had not originated in the Islamic world: like so many great ideas, it had been imported, in this case from India. This openness and intellectual bravery paid off in other ways too: the Arabic world triumphed and innovated in different scientific fields, such as mathematics, medicine, physics, chemistry, and optics.

Another reason for the world and particularly Europe to be thankful to the Muslim world is the preservation of some of the great works of Greek philosophy. While one of the Abrahamic religions destroyed and persecuted both the ideas and their believers, another one, Islam, didn't abstain from controversy and understood the importance and intellectual value of differing opinions. It is largely due to the work of Muslim scholars from that period that we were able to retain the works of intellectual giants like Aristotle. Philosophers such as Ibn Rushd analysed and used the works of Aristotle in their pursuit of truth. Remarkably, not even religion was spared from the curiosity of that culture. According to Norberg, Ibn Rushd wanted the holy text to be examined using scientific methods. In cases of discrepancy between science and religion, the great Aristotelian argued for the reinterpretation or a metaphorical understanding of the religious text. It is hard to believe that Ibn Rushd lived in the twelfth century.

Sadly, the Islamic enlightenment too did not last forever. Are you starting to see a pattern? Troubled by uprisings and conflicts, such as the one in Muslim Spain from the eleventh century, and the partition of the empire, the culture was hit by a traditionalist (tribalist) backlash. It became more conservative and less tolerant and courageous in relation to different ideas, religions, and people. Additionally, foreign conflicts with Christian crusaders and Reconquistadores, as well as the Mongolian threat from the east weakened and ultimately ended the culture of freedom of the Islamic world. The Mongol army invaded Baghdad on the 13 February 1258, carrying out a bloody massacre, destroying libraries, mosques, and the entire city. This was followed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries by a Black Death Epidemic and another invasion, this time from the Turco-Mongol Timur.

The Islamic world did not recover. Conservatism and traditionalism eventually replaced openness and tolerance, tossing Islamic culture into the state that many Muslim countries are in today. The lesson however is a differentiated one: any kind of religious or intellectual orthodoxy can lead to the decline of a civilisation. For a long time, the Muslim world was the shining example of tolerance, openness, and progress. The fundamentalists were sitting in Europe.

Song China¹¹

Around the same time (960–1279) another Golden Era was happening in the Far East. Norberg quotes the historian Stephen Davies to demonstrate the shocking differences between medieval Europe and China. According to Davies, the Europeans did not

¹¹ Norberg, p.169-173.

reach the economic, social, scientific, and intellectual levels of the Song empire until the eighteenth century¹². Yes, you read that right! The Chinese civilisation between the tenth and thirteenth centuries was so shockingly close to modernity that the Industrial Revolution could very well have happened there, around 600–800 years before the Great Enrichment that we are currently experiencing.

The Song empire was incredibly cosmopolitan and innovative. It had an enormous level of religious and economic freedom, with a relatively small government and an inclusive immigration policy. During that time, the Chinese increased their productivity and level of sophistication in pretty much every noticeable area. The farmers, protected by property rights, invented new solutions to grow and sell their crops. Scientific successes in various fields such as mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and metallurgy facilitated economic and intellectual progress. Although they lost access to the Silk Road, the Chinese did not give up trade; instead, they innovated and prospered in the field of maritime trade, creating larger and better ships.

Neither the emperor nor collusive cartels like the European guilds prevented creative destruction: through innovation in all sectors, the productivity of the economy was rising, forcing many workers to specialise in other fields and to use their abilities and talents more efficiently. They used the minds and hands of people from all around the world: Jews, Muslims, Indian monks, and other groups of people were allowed to prosper, trade, and run for public office. Norberg's example of iron and textile production is the one that impressed me the most. Not only had the Chinese already started to use coal instead of wood for iron production, an innovation in itself, but according to Norberg, tax returns show that the amount of iron produced by the Chinese economy at that time amounted to the combined output of Europe in 1700. We are talking about the late eleventh century! It seems incredible that the Chinese created sophisticated textile machines, text printing, paper production, and even paper money. It is impossible to describe all their amazing achievements without copying the book (buy it).

Some of you might still be a little sceptical, which is understandable, so Norberg provides some numbers. During the time of the Song empire, the Chinese population more than doubled, from around 50 million to more than 100 million. This is impressive enough, but considering that the size had been stable for half a millennium, the remarkable nature of this growth may become clearer.

As Norberg states, Song China indeed was the most advanced civilisation of its time, comparable only to the Islamic world, but economically superior to even the impressive achievements of the Ottoman empire.

The Mongols¹³

The Song empire lasted for a little more than 300 years, ultimately succumbing to the attacks of the Mongol armies in the thirteenth century. The Mongols are rightly remembered as vicious warlords and warriors, yet, like all other great empires, they had an

¹² S. Davies, *The Wealth Explosion: The Nature and Origins of Modernity*. Brighton, Edward Everett Root, 2019, p.85; Norberg, p.170.

¹³ Norberg, p.173-174; p.94-97.

understanding of strategic tolerance. After conquering Song China, the Mongols did not continue to enslave and torment the population or attempt to impose their own values and systems. Instead, they continued the cosmopolitan and open politics of the Song dynasty. The two cultures, as well as the ideas and influences that Mongols acquired in other parts of the world, created another (positively) explosive mixture that made further progress inevitable. China was reconnected to the Silk Road and infused with another dose of creative energy through easier and quicker exchange and trade.

This wasn't a sudden change of strategy: since Genghis Khan, the Mongol Empire had been a remarkably open and tolerant superpower. The Mongols were never afraid to use the talents and ideas of other ethnic and cultural circles. They had religious freedom and allowed different groups to practise relatively freely – in stark contrast to the fundamentalism of Europe.

But, you guessed it, even this combination of vicious warlords and tolerant traders wasn't able to survive for eternity. The Mongols created a vast empire based on trade, open minds and strategic tolerance, and a strong army that almost overran Europe and that made other contemporary military powers look like Mike Tyson's opponents in the 1980s.

In the end, an army wasn't enough to defeat them. The bubonic plague and its consequences lead to the establishment of the Ming dynasty in 1368, which, together with its successor - the Manchu Qing dynasty - destroyed the rest of the cosmopolitan foundations of the Song empire. Just as with the other fallen empires, these two dynasties enforced a traditionalist and conservative system, burning books, banning ideas and discourse, forbidding internal movement, and even destroying the technological achievements of the Song and Mongol empires. Ultimately, this stopped the development of arguably the most advanced civilisation of its time. Just like that, the richest and most advanced country on Earth became poor and insignificant again.

How was Europe reborn¹⁴?

Since leaving the Roman empire, we haven't heard a lot from the European continent. The reason is that, in comparison with the aforementioned empires, there really is simply less to tell. However, just as the Greeks and Romans profited from the Phoenician and Persian civilisations, Europe was lucky to have Islam. As mentioned earlier, scholars like Ibn Rushd preserved the common heritage that in the end started a wave of intellectual, economic, and political revolutions that the European rulers were not able to stop. Aristotelian ideas quickly gained new popularity, spawning whole new intellectual traditions such as the scholastics and the school of Salamanca. Those different thinkers were enlightened by the Greek philosopher and started to analyse the world using the logical tools that he gave them. Naturally, both the Church and the secular rulers tried to suppress those ideas, but as Norberg shows, luckily for the entire world, they failed. In comparison with the Roman, Persian, Mongol, Chinese, and Ottoman empires, Europe was uniquely decentralised. Additionally, its geography made the persecution of enlightened and therefore dangerous thinkers difficult¹⁵.

14 Norberg, p.139-147; ; p.p.177-209.

15 Norberg, p.151.

From the fifteenth century on, the Spanish Reconquistadores followed a policy of exclusion and religious purification, forcing groups like Jews and Muslims to either convert to Christianity or leave the country. As a result, the Spanish lost an incredible amount of intellectual and economic potential.

One of the most powerful arguments in favour of openness that Norberg presents in his book is the contrast between the Spanish empire and the Dutch Republic¹⁶. From the fifteenth century on, the Spanish Reconquistadores followed a policy of exclusion and religious purification, forcing groups like Jews and Muslims to either convert to Christianity or leave the country. As a result, the Spanish lost an incredible amount of intellectual and economic potential. According to the evidence that Norberg quotes, the Spanish GDP in 1750 was lower than it had been 250 years earlier. The Spanish inquisition was used by the Ottoman Empire and Muslim India, and competition in Europe was growing as well.

In 1581, the Dutch provinces declared their independence from the Spanish empire and very quickly introduced the complete opposite of the Spanish model. The Dutch Republic was a state based on openness in trade, immigration, and ideas. Compared with other European countries, it had remarkable religious freedom and became the 'safe haven' for the misfits, persecuted, and discriminated against on the European continent. Soon, the Dutch Republic would become the richest country on Earth.

However, what started with Aristotelian ideas continued in different places in Europe. Religious conflicts and the persecutions of innovative thinkers and misfits did not stop. But given its unique decentralisation, the disruptors were able to vote with their feet and simply emigrate to a country that accepted them. Soon, European governments started to compete to attract as many Elon Musks as possible.

If you have watched Downton Abbey, you might find it surprising that the Industrial Revolution started in England. This only shows the power of the enlightenment ideas that caused the glorious revolution of 1688, which put the Dutch William of Orange on the throne¹⁷. The liberal idea started a process that at that point could hardly be stopped and that eventually lead to the Industrial Revolution in Britain and other European countries¹⁸. Innovation and entrepreneurship were now seen as something good, as virtues. The British colony in North America took the ideas of the English and Scottish philosophers even further, and soon created the wealthiest and most powerful country in the history of humankind¹⁹. America's economic and religious freedom, as well as the freedom of movement and immigration, facilitated a great transfer of knowledge, ability and talent, and an intermingling of cultures and ideas that continues until this day. While some immigration controls started to emerge in the nineteenth century, until World War I, the

16 Norberg, p.97-106.

17 Norberg, p.185-188.

18 Norberg, p.188-199.

19 Norberg, p. 199-203.

United States did not impose any strong restrictions on movement from Europe, and it paid off²⁰.

As Norberg repeatedly emphasises, this doesn't mean that the story of Britain, the United States, and other European countries was some kind of libertarian fairy tale. There was a long way to go, and not everyone was treated fairly from the start. Women and basically anyone who wasn't white were not treated with the same respect or didn't get the same rights as others. Slavery remained a shameful practice until after the civil war, and even after that, systemic discrimination such as Jim Crow laws destroyed the lives and chances of many Americans.

Why do we fight openness?

Nevertheless, the history of Europe and the United States, and subsequently of the majority of the world, is one of progress infused by increasing openness.

As Norberg shows time and time again, open exchange through trade, open doors, and open minds has facilitated and created times of enlightenment, progress, and wealth. Through mutual exchange, different cultures were able to profit from each other's innovations and production, and to specialise in the fields most suitable to their economic realities. Freedom of migration facilitated the interplay of ideas and cultures, creating unique combinations and inventions, and making it possible to use the talent of each mind wherever it can be most productive. The openness of minds enabled us to find truths and to develop in directions that an eighteenth-century human could not even imagine.

And yet, all but one of the enrichments ended. I have summarized the political and perhaps immediate reasons put forward by Norberg briefly above, but the problem is much deeper. It is impossible to go through the entire argument of the second part of the book, however the cause, according to Norberg, is our nature and two opposing sides of it.

Humans have always cooperated and traded, in fact, according to Norberg, the story of trade is as old as the history of humanity itself. Homo sapiens is a cooperative species. We work together wherever we can, and have an extraordinary ability to build alliances and partnerships quickly. This is even visible in our facial features – humans have white sclera that makes it possible for others to see what we are looking at, while other animals, including our cousins the chimpanzees, have brown sclera that hide their intentions²¹. We had an evolutionary advantage when other humans knew our fears and intentions.

Norberg quotes Steven Pinker, an evolutionary psychologist according to whom we simultaneously developed three self-reinforcing traits that increased our tendency towards sociability: intelligence, language, and cooperation²².

20 Norberg, p.104.

21 Norberg, p.25.

22 S. Pinker, The Cognitive Niche: Coevolution of intelligence, sociality, and language. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 107(2), 2010; Norberg p.23.

Additionally the cultural evolution that Karl Popper has diagnosed potentiated and accelerated the process²³. Our cultural evolution, evolution through language, communication, and observation, is much faster than genetic evolution: we learn from what we hear and what we see, which happens almost instantly, while genetic evolution needs at least one, and in most cases several generations to establish its changes.

This gives us two conclusions: the more people working to solve a problem the better, and it is completely wrong to push certain parts of society down.

This gives us two conclusions: the more people working to solve a problem the better, and it is completely wrong to push certain parts of society down. We don't just harm people and deprive them of their rights and happiness, which alone should be enough to stop such oppression, but we actually deprive society of all the progress and innovation that those groups (such as women, and religious or racial minorities) could have achieved.

Of course this isn't just an argument for population density, but for international trade and migration. Through trade, we learn new solutions to problems that we sometimes didn't even know were available. People from different countries have different outlooks on life, due to their traditions and cultures.

Through trade and interaction, we don't just directly monetarily profit from each other, we also gain indirectly, by learning from each other.

However cooperation is not the only side of human nature. For 290,000 years humans lived in a zero-sum world in which their respective groups were the guarantee of survival. Losing the competition against a different tribe was a certain death. In today's modern economy, the gains of the Germans do not harm the Polish. Through open exchange and the division of labour, both can profit at the same time. But for the majority of our history, of which only the last 200 years created the vast majority of wealth and innovation, the story has been different. We did not have the economy. We didn't have the mutual gains. We had to create them.

This, according to Norberg, is why it is so hard to understand and emotionally comprehend the modern world. Our world is in the now, but our brains are in the past. Humans have the ability to forge and create alliances, which makes cooperation possible, but one of the reasons we developed this trait is that we needed it to defeat and kill other humans and groups. This tribalism and irrationality is a part of us and will remain one for a long time to come. It will grow stronger in times of uncertainty and crisis, and will cause problems: Protectionists will destroy the wealth of millions of people. Nationalists will discriminate and hurt 'other' groups for arbitrary reasons. People in poor countries will keep dying because rich countries do not give them the opportunity to enter 'their' terrain.

But we need to resist. We need to understand and fight for the values that created our world. We need to defend human civilisation from our prehistorical brains and keep working to develop further. The world of today is the best reality in human history – but we can do more. Billions and trillions of dollars can still be made by relatively simple

23 K. Popper and J.C. Eccles, *The Self and its Brain*. London, Routledge, 1984, p.48; Norberg, p.26-30.

measures, such as multilateral trade agreements and opening up migration. Lives can be saved and diseases can be defeated. We still have a lot of potential.



Let us all read Norberg, and reach for more.



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