BOOK REVIEW

Title: **The Rational Optimist: How Prosperity Evolves**

Author: **Matt Ridley**

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Matt Ridley argues in *The Rational Optimist* that “there is no reason we cannot solve the problems that beset us, of economic crashes, population explosions, climate change and terrorism, of poverty, AIDS, depression and obesity” (pp. 7–8). In his view, if we want to deal successfully with these challenges, all we need to do is to encourage specialization, to promote the exchange of goods and ideas, to develop modern technologies, and to eliminate bureaucratic red tape. Ridley also claims he is a “rational optimist” and has “arrived at optimism not through temperament or instinct, but by looking at the evidence” (p. 10).

Most of Ridley’s ideas are not new; they are quite similar to the arguments advanced by the “Hard Greens” more than a decade ago:

The outside world imposes no limits to growth on a society that unleashes the real kind of efficiency, economic efficiency. Resources don’t limit growth; markets find or create new ones. Pollution need not limit growth; turn pollution into property, and capitalists will package pollution and transform it into wealth. . . . On all sides, free markets create abundance. Efficiency—the real kind, discovered by markets, not bureaucrats—creates still more abundance. Complexity creates efficiency, which creates still more abundance. (Huber, 1999, pp. 146–147)

Ridley subscribes to all these tenets and adds a few more: that human intelligence was by and large brought into existence and developed by exchange and specialization, which are considered the most important aspects of our civilization; and that the steady (albeit erratic) growth we have experienced since the beginning of human civilization proves and guarantees that growth will continue.

While specialization and exchange are rightly seen by Ridley as important characteristics of the capitalist system, in which everyone works for everyone else, his argument is not convincing. Homer-Dixon (2009) has presented evidence substantiating that, on the contrary, what made the human brain and consequently the human civilization so powerful was the development of “*generalist* [italics added] strategies for survival,” which allowed humans “to thrive in a wider range of conditions” (p. 199).

I also believe that our focus on specialization, exchange, and continued progress are major contributing factors to our current crises. Ridley himself admits that the rich (and probably many of us in living in the West) “do lots of unnecessary damage to the planet as they go on

striving to get richer long after the point where it is having much effect on their happiness” (p. 27).

Hardly anybody denies that science has opened the way to enormous improvements in our quality of life. It is however questionable and risky to consider the capacities of science limitless or to disregard credible scientific evidence. For example, Ridley presents arguments in favour of some aspects of modern food production, such as the factory-style production of meat. I found Ridley’s arguments on this matter very questionable—as he disregards the dangers posed by the extensive use of hormones and antibiotics in such operations. Other examples of presenting carefully selected evidence can be found in Ridley’s rendering of the “beneficial” aspects of big-box retailing or in the fact that he strongly supports genetic engineering, without considering its risks.

While being selective on matters such as these, Ridley is consistent in his unsuccessful attempts to discredit well-known scientists, such as Rachel Carson, Theo Colborn, Martin Rees, and several others, who have tried to alert the public that the current path taken by our civilization is putting nature—and us—in danger. A similar determination can be seen in Ridley’s efforts of minimizing or discrediting the seriousness of the climate change crisis.

On the one hand, he plays down (as many climate change deniers do) the risks of climate change by pointing to the very large range of possible temperature increases advanced by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, from 1.1°C to 6°C (p. 330). On the other hand, Ridley ‘cherry-picks’ the evidence regarding the costs of mitigating climate change:

As for what might happen after 2100, in 2006 the British government appointed a civil servant, Nicholas Stern, to count the potential cost of extreme climate change far into the future. He came up with the answer that the cost was so high, that almost any price to mitigate it now would be worth paying. (Ridley, p. 330)

Ridley’s statements are extremely biased. The extensive studies presented by Stern are not only mentioning “the potential cost of *extreme* climate change *far into the future* [italics added]”, but they focus mostly on how much it would cost us if we decide to mitigate climate change *now* (which we should, but probably will not do). The costs advanced by Stern (2009) are the following: “Achieving 500 ppm[e]¹ might cost 2% of the world GDP per annum over the next half-century, while 550 ppm[e] would cost around 1%” (p. 48). These costs are far lower than the extremely high ones that Ridley is hinting at. Just as a side note, portraying Stern as a “civil servant” is unfair and displays yet again Ridley’s tendency to handle evidence in whatever way it is advantageous to him (this is probably an attempt to diminish Stern’s status and at the same time point to the “bureaucratic red tape”). Stern, a distinguished academic economist who taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was chief economist of the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development from 1994 to 1999 and chief economist and senior vice-president of the World Bank from 2000 to 2003.

It would be hard to think that Ridley’s bias regarding climate change could go any further, but it does. His final arguments on this issue, presented at the end of a section entitled *Warmer and richer or cooler and poorer?* (p. 333) state that “glasshouses often use air enriched in carbon dioxide to 1,000 ppm to enhance plant growth rates” (p. 337) and that “under the

¹. The concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere is measured in parts per million (ppm). However, CO₂ is not the only greenhouse gas; using parts per million equivalent—ppm[e]—ensures the influence of other greenhouse gases, such as methane (CH₄), nitrous oxide (N₂O), and chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), is taken into account.

warmest [italics added] scenario, much land could revert to wilderness, leaving only 5 per cent of the world under the plough in 2100, compared with 11.6 per cent today, allowing more space for wilderness” (p. 338).

The Nongovernmental International Panel on Climate Change, probably the most vocal group of climate change deniers, has argued along very similar lines: They have said that “a warmer world will be a safer and healthier world for humans and wildlife alike,” and that “the *net* effect of continued warming and rising carbon dioxide concentrations in the atmosphere will be beneficial to humans, plants, and wildlife” (Idso & Singer, 2009, p. III).

One question Ridley asks rhetorically in his book, citing Babington Macaulay, is the following: “On what principle is it, that when we see nothing but improvement behind us, we are to expect nothing but deterioration before us?” (p. 11). This question resonates deeply throughout Ridley’s work, and his arguments imply that, actually, there is no such principle. The overarching message of Ridley’s book would then be to leave all worries behind, engage in specialization and exchange, and hope that everything will fall into place, as it has happened so many times in the past. If my understanding is correct, then I find the book very simplistic. It is true that today many people have achieved a standard of living unimaginable only a few decades ago; according to Ridley today we have “more peace, freedom, leisure time, education, medicine, travel, movies, mobile phones and massages [*sic*] than any generation in history” (p. 291). However these achievements are highly dependent on fossil fuels and are distributed around the planet in a highly inequitable manner.

Seeing nothing but improvement before us (because, as Ridley implies, it would be illogical to see deterioration) could lead us to commit a serious fallacy. Ridley presents many examples to substantiate that “new equals good”; however, this fallacy does not refer only to the particular situations presented, but goes deeper, at a conceptual level. Considering that anything new is an improvement over the old raises the possibility “to dispense with ethical considerations” (Russell, 1946/2005, p. 711). I see this as a theoretical flaw that undermines much of Ridley’s staunch belief in the inevitability of progress.

Ridley’s approach has been fairly assessed “as irrational optimism—a blind belief that what has worked before will always work, regardless of a changing environment, whether financial or planetary” (Pearce, 2010, para. 1). Moreover, it has been argued convincingly that many of our decisions, big and small, are “predictably irrational” (Ariely, 2008, p. 6); from a scientific point of view Ridley’s belief in rationality can probably be substantiated just as little as his belief in unrelenting progress.

In the last sentences of his book, Ridley states that “the twenty-first century will be a magnificent time to be alive” (p. 359) and exhorts his readers to dare to be optimists. The first 11 years of this century have been, there is little doubt, far from magnificent, and this can change only if we are highly successful in dealing with our many and serious challenges. I cannot be the type of optimist advocated by Ridley because concentrating all our efforts into specializing and exchanging goods and ideas, with the hope that everything else will be fine, is an approach that I find—not rational—but reckless.

I see this book as an unimaginative act of hope.

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