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The Reith Lectures 2025 with Rutger Bregman

Moral Revolution



1. A Time of Monsters

Anita Anand [00:00:00] Welcome to the Radio Theatre here at Broadcasting House in central London for this year's Reith Lectures. This year's lecturer is a Dutch historian and the author of bestselling books like *Humankind* and *Utopia for Realists*. Now that first one was written when he was just 25 years of age. His books have struck a chord with many because they offer hope at a time when it feels like we're facing depressingly crushing problems. But to get to the hope that he talks about, our lecturer is asking for something in return. He believes we need to transform the way we live our lives.

He is not a man to shy away from controversy either. Probably best known for calling out a group of bankers and billionaires at the World Economic Forum at Davos, where he castigated them for refusing to address what he called the real issue. Of tax avoidance by the rich. It was, he said, like being at a firefighter's conference and not being allowed to talk about water.

This series of lectures is entitled *Moral Revolution*. It is, he says, a call for action. Let's meet him. Will you please welcome the BBC's 2025 Reith lecturer, Rutger Bregman.

(Applause)

Anita Anand: Rutger, I mentioned that clip, which is where most people will have first come across you. When you did that, were you aware that you were going to go viral?

Rutger Bregman [00:01:43] Well, look, for some reason they have not invited me back. I'm very glad that the BBC still allows people to talk about water. But no, I didn't really expect that. It was my first time at Davos. I found it to be quite boring, like exceptionally boring, even for conferences. And on Thursday, I had fled to my hotel room to work on the book that I was quite excited about, "Humankind." And I had a call with my wife. And she was saying like, come on, you're a Davos, right? Tell them what you really think.

Anita Anand [00:02:15] I mean, it may be that you find it boring. They haven't put that on the poster, ever. You were very young when you discovered that you could talk to people like this. Twenty-five, you wrote your first book. But actually, the sense of morality you were telling me goes back to the playground. Tell us when you first realized that you quite enjoyed poking power.

Rutger Bregman [00:02:37] I grew up in a religious family. My dad is a Protestant minister or was. My Mum is a teacher for kids with special needs. And I guess always growing up, morality was an important thing. A lot of people, when they hear that I'm the son of a preacher, they say, oh, that explains it all. But actually, that I always think like you got to meet my mum. She explains it all. And it was only later in life that my passion for history took off.

Anita Anand [00:03:12] I'm really interested in this. Some people criticize historians for drawing too much on the past and relating it to where we are here and now. They say, you know, that was a different time. People had a different outlook, different pressures, different morality, if you like. And so leaning on the past as much as you do as a historian, skews your view of the present where things are so different. What do you say about that?

Rutger Bregman [00:03:41] Well, look, as people, we have all kinds of problems, right? And we have those problems, then we talk to other people, like, hey, do you experience that as well? Like, do have any lessons to teach me? So I think history can be just like that. Like, the past is a different country, obviously, but we can learn a lot from that.

Anita Anand [00:03:58] Well, we are looking forward to learning a lot from you this evening. Please welcome our Reith Lecturer 2025, Rutger, please take the podium.

(Applause)

Rutger Bregman [00:04:21] As the son of a preacher, I learned long ago that every good sermon consists of three parts. Act one, misery. Act two, redemption. And act three, thankfulness. Now, this is going to be a hopeful series of lectures about the extraordinary era of human history we're living through, about humanity's wild possibilities, and about the power of small groups of dedicated citizens to determine our collective destiny. But I'm afraid that today we're going to have to spend most of our time on Act 1. Misery.

Now, from an early age, I've been fascinated by stories of upheaval and collapse. Growing up in the Netherlands, I was especially gripped by the tales of how our small country was occupied by the Nazis. I endlessly asked myself, what would I have done? Would I have had the courage to do what's right? As an adult. And as a historian, I still ask those

questions, and they feel more urgent than ever. I know I've made a name for myself writing hopeful books about the goodness in humanity and the utopias we can build together. But today, it would feel dishonest to begin on an optimistic note. As the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci wrote in 1926, scribbling in a notebook from a fascist prison, the old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born, now is the time of monsters.

[00:05:58] To grasp the depths of our current misery, it helps to start with a classic story of collapse. When the great historian Edward Gibbon described the decline of Rome, he didn't speak in vague abstractions. He gave us names, dates, and details, page after page of cowardice and corruption. Reading the decline and fall of the Roman Empire is like watching a civilization rot in slow motion. Sadistic emperors on gilded thrones, generals who sold out their own armies, and senators who cared more for spectacle than statecraft.

And yet what shocks you most when you read Gibbon today isn't the depravity, it's the familiarity. Gibbon wrote about politicians who lacked seriousness. Elites who lacked virtue, and societies that mistook decadence for progress. 2000 years later, we live in an age where billionaires dodge their taxes, politicians perform instead of govern, and media barons profit from lies and hatred. The Roman elite fiddled while Rome burned. Our elites live-streamed the fire and monetized the smoke. Immorality and unseriousness. Those are the two defining traits of our leaders today. And they're not accidental flaws, but the logical outcome of what I call the survival of the shameless. Today, it's not the most capable who rise, but at least scrupulous. Not the most virtuous, but most brazen.

[00:07:32] I'll get to Europe later, but first let's cross the Atlantic to the place where this logic has now reached its purest form. The United States. I don't want to bore you with an exhaustive summary of all the madness of the past few years. On one side we had an establishment propping up an elderly man in obvious mental decline. On the other we had a convicted reality star. When it comes to staffing his administration, he is a modern day Caligula, the Roman emperor who wanted to make his horse a consul. He surrounds himself with loyalists, grifters and sycophants.

[00:08:13] What interests me is not left vs. Right, it's courage v Cowardice, virtue versus Vice. And the truth is, the decay is everywhere. The moral rot runs deep across elite institutions of every stripe. If the right is defined by its shameless corruption, then liberals answer with a paralyzing cowardice. Dozens of corporations, media networks, universities and museums have already bent knee to the new regime. Some of the most prestigious law firms rushed to pledge their loyalty.

But let's not pretend that this was a fall from grace. These firms spent years defending Wall Street criminals, tobacco conglomerates and opioid profiteers. They didn't betray their principles. They revealed them. Their loyalty was never to justice or democracy, but to power and profit.

[00:09:07] And where were these loyalties forged? The answer is simple. At the world's most celebrated universities, at the greatest bastions of science and reason, in secular temples with grand columns and mottos inscribed in stone, "Truth" at Harvard, "Light and Truth" at Yale, and "In the nation's service and the service of humanity" at Princeton. Every year, thousands of brilliant teenagers write beautiful applications essays about the global problems they aspire to solve. Climate change, bold hunger, infectious disease, But a few years later, most have been funneled towards companies like McKinsey, Goldman Sachs, and Kirkland & Alice. A friend of mine who studied at Oxford calls it the Bermuda Triangle of Talent. Consultancy, finance, and corporate law. A gaping black hole that

sucks up so many of our so-called best and brightest. A dark chasm that has tripled in size since the 1980s.

Sure, I know such companies like to spray a thin layer of purpose or corporate responsibility over their dubious business models. Did you know that tobacco giant, Philip Morris, has a stellar ESG score? Have you heard that British American tobacco was named both a climate leader and a diversity leader by the Financial Times? And they really deserved it. Their CO2 compensation programs are state of the art and their inclusivity trainings are among the best in the business. They are doing so much good while killing millions of people.

[00:10:41] Please let's not kid ourselves. There has been no moral awakening in the corporate world. Business for good, conscious capitalism, social impact. It was all mostly a sham. Beneath the talk, the cultural tide has been running in the other way for decades. Just look at the American Freshman Survey, which has tracked the values of first-year college students since the 1960s. Half a century ago, when students were asked about their most important life goals, 80% to 90% named. Developing a meaningful philosophy of life. Just 50% prioritized making a lot of money. Today, those numbers have flipped. Now 80 to 90% say that getting rich is what matters most and only half still value a meaningful philosophy of life.

Now remember, this is not human nature, it's human culture. The kids are merely holding up a mirror and what they reflect back is what we've been teaching them. Currently, around 40% of Harvard graduates end up in that Bermuda triangle of BS jobs. And if you include big tech, the share rises to more than 60%. And the work there is often just as meaningless. In the infamous words of a math prodigy who ended up at Facebook, the best minds of my generation are thinking about how to make people click ads. That sucks. On both the left and the right, America has been betrayed by its elites. Like Rome in its waning days, the empire is corroding from within, not by the absence of talent and wealth, but by the lack of courage and virtue.

[00:12:17] I would love to be able to say that things are much better on this side of the Atlantic, that Europe has become the new leader of the free world. Obviously. Although our politics is not as brazenly corrupt, the same spirit of decadence haunts the old world. The truth is that the defining traits of Europe's elites aren't just immorality and unseriousness. It's also irrelevance.

[00:12:46] If America resembles the fall of Rome, spectacular and vulgar, then Europe is reliving the slow death of Venice. One empire collapses in flames, the other sinks in silence. One is consumed by fire, the other lost in fog. Perhaps you're familiar with the story. At its peak, Venice was a marvel of commerce and innovation. A small city built on a lagoon had become a maritime empire, dominating Mediterranean trade for centuries. Its success was rooted in a relatively open system. Merchants could rise through merit, trade was well regulated, and institutions like the Great Council struck a balance between aristocracy and accountability.

But by the 14th century, that openness began to vanish. The seeds of decline were sown in 1297 with the Serata, or closing, of the great council. Membership became hereditary, creating a class of entrenched nobles who guarded their privileges fiercely. This selfish elite monopolized government positions, blocked newcomers, and rewrote the rules to protect their wealth and power. Over the centuries, Venetian politics devolved into rent-seeking. The ruling families extracted profits from trade monopolies without reinvesting in

innovation. They poured their wealth into palaces and casinos and ignored the growing threats from emerging powers like the Ottoman Empire. Young elites didn't want to become merchants and admirals anymore. Instead, they preferred a life of leisure and luxury. And over time, Venice became a shadow of its former self, beautiful on the outside, hollow on the inside. Does that remind you of anything?

[00:14:29] Today, the whole of Europe risks turning into one big Venice, a beautiful open-air museum, a great destination for Chinese and American tourists, a place to admire what was once the center of the world. Just look at our most valuable companies. In the US and China, the commanding heights of the economy are in technology and industry, AI, electric cars, solar panels, batteries, whatever you think of big tech, and it's all a carcass. These are power industries, shaping the future. In fact, all the American giants, Microsoft, Apple, Amazon, NVIDIA, Alphabet, are individually worth more than the entire German or French stock market. By contrast, Europe's top companies are dominated by big fashion. Dior, Louis Vuitton, L'Oreal, we've become the continent of handbags instead of hardware.

At the same time, our societies are rapidly aging. Birth rates are plummeting, growth is stuttering, and Europe's wealth has become largely dynastic. In Germany, three out of four billionaires inherited their fortunes. In the UK, families with children haven't seen their incomes rise for 20 years, while pensioners' incomes have kept on growing. In France, the elderly now enjoy higher incomes than the working-age population, and that's a first in world history. Politically, we've become naval gazers, mainly obsessing over immigration, even though only 10% of us were born outside the EU, and will need those newcomers to sustain all those pensioners and inheritors.

[00:16:05] Europe has long fancied itself as the continent of values. We love to lecture others on democracy and human rights. But just look at us this year. While Israel dropped the equivalent of six Hiroshima's worth of bombs on Gaza, European leaders could barely bring themselves to express their concerns over the humanitarian situation as if this was some kind of natural disaster. But while Europeans aren't very successful at restraining others. We've become very good at regulating ourselves. China is the world's industrial powerhouse. The US is the World's technological powerhouse and we lead the world in rulemaking.

We've trained a whole new class, not of builders and creators, but of compliance officers, ESG auditors, sustainability verifiers and data protection consultants. Regulate before you innovate, supervise before you create. That seems to be Europe's mindset right now. We proudly announced our AI act to the world, even though we had no frontier AI companies to speak of. We're brilliant at governing industries that we don't have. Just like Venice, in the 14th century, we have an economy that rewards those who increase complexity and extract rents.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm an old-fashioned European social democrat. I'm not here to peddle anti-government or anti-EU clichés. I am well aware that a recent large-scale study found that so-called BS jobs, jobs employees themselves see as socially meaningless, are three times more common in the private sector than in the public sector. And I also know that even after Brexit, the UK government's pathologies are worse. For example, its tax code now runs to 22,000 pages, the longest in the world. In Europe, we should be proud of our strong welfare states and our ambitious climate efforts. And we definitely need to regulate big tech. But social democracy should focus on building the future, not just regulating the present. And regulation should be simple, transparent, and open for newcomers, not dense, obscure, and protective of the status quo.

What we're now getting is a huge waste of talent. Our best minds aren't building start-ups or solving real-world problems. They're writing reports and preparing for audits. In the name of climate inequity, we've built a compliance economy, one that punishes productivity and rewards bureaucracy. The state has lost much of its capacity to deliver because civil servants who once knew how to build have been replaced by consultants.

[00:18:50] So you might wonder, where is the pushback? Surely, in the face of so much decay, a new left, a progressive movement would have risen, one determined to make government great again. But no, a big part of the modern left, especially in Europe, has turned into the party of no. No to growth, no to building, no to ambition. Its new gospel is degrowth.

To be fair, the degrowth movement names something real. Our economies cannot go on like this, cutting down forests faster than they can regrow, emptying the seas of fish and flooding the atmosphere with carbon. The warning of de-growth is serious, but their answer is not. They are allergic to technology and suspicious of prosperity. They wave away stubborn facts of supply and demand, pretending that you can haul off housing prices by decree or abolish poverty by slogan. What they offer is not a practical programme for solving problems. But a deeply unpopular and quite elitist ideology of managed decline.

[00:19:54] Most baffling, I think, is the commandment issued in certain corners of the left to have no children anymore. Demographers tell us that across the developed world, the drop in birth rates is overwhelmingly driven by people on the left opting out of parenthood. Think about that for a moment. The tradition that once stood for the future now treats the most beautiful thing in the world. New life, as a crime against the planet. If you wanted to design a strategy to make your movement irrelevant within a generation, you could hardly do better.

The deeper tragedy is that the left once believed in progress. The idea that people and nations could grow. This was a tradition of education and emancipation. As the American historian Nelson Liechtenstein has written:

[00:20:45] “ All great reform movements, from the crusade against slavery to the labor upsurge of the 1930s, defined themselves as champions of a moral and patriotic nationalism, which they counterposed to the parochial and selfish elites which stood at war at their vision of a virtuous society.”

[00:21:01] But today, that utopian horizon has dimmed. Instead of inspiring people with a vision of a better future, the left has turned inward, fragmenting into ever smaller moral circles. It has become quick to cancel, slow to compromise, quick to judge, slow to persuade. The catharsis of public shaming has replaced the grind of building coalitions. So today we have pronouns, but no progressive taxation. Land acknowledgement but no affordable housing, inclusive language but exclusive zoning. We've got the optics. But not the outcomes. Should we really be surprised, then, that the left is losing across the developed world? Of course not. When you stop building and organizing, you don't just lose elections, you lose the people. And when the left steps back, the void doesn't stay empty. Others are ready to rush in.

[00:21:59] So now, the bad news!

If you think the fall of Rome or Venice was scary, let me assure you, it could get much worse. Yes, we have clowns and cowards among us, but we also have actual fascists in our midst. We could end up ruled by feudal rent seekers who slowly drain the life out of our society, but we could also be taken over by people who destroy it outright.

[00:22:25] I recently attended an exclusive Silicon Valley conference. Over dinner, the conversation was dominated by a tech bro who spoke in ways that reminded me of 1930s fascists like Mussolini. I pointed this out to him, and he replied without irony, Yeah, I think we should get a little fascist.

This wasn't just one guy. He's part of a broader resurgence of fascism across the Western world. Do we really need to use the F word? Yes, we do. Just as genocide scholars can clearly classify what's happened in Gaza, scholars of fascism can identify the signs of what's rising now. We see armed troops patrolling the streets. We see masked men dragging people into vans. We see raids on the homes of political opponents. We see the rise of a paramilitary force that's loyal to one man alone. It's no coincidence that some of the leading experts of fascism have left the United States. One of them said that the lesson of 1933 is to get out early, not late.

[00:23:30] All the while, white supremacists are celebrating. Eight years ago, you were an extremist if you protested being replaced by immigrants, a leading neo-Nazi recently wrote on Twitter. Now it's official White House policy. Or look at the rise of neo-fascist influencers like the blogger Curtis Yarvin. He wants to dismantle democracy and replace it with a techno-monarchy led by a CEO with absolute power, someone like Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos. Yarvin has inspired billionaires like Peter Thiel, who in turn helped bankroll the rise of JD Vance, the current vice president. And others go further still. Michael Anton, one of the most influential MAGA intellectuals, has popularized the idea of Red Caesarism, a form of one-man rule that he describes as halfway between monarchy and tyranny.

[00:24:21] These people are ruthlessly power-seeking. They literally believe it's time for a new Napoleon or a right-wing Lenin to take over. And like Lenin, they know they're deeply unpopular. That they would never win free and fair elections. Which is why they're against democracy and why they are betting on our apathy. They want us to plug out, to scroll, to binge, to put on our VR glasses and noise canceling headphones while they take over the world.

If you're horrified by the news today, then I urge you expand your imagination. Picture yourself, 10 years from now, reading a history of the coming decade. If it told the story of an authoritarian takeover, then what you are seeing today is exactly what you expect in the opening chapters. I did warn you, this lecture was going to be misery.

[00:25:17] A decade ago, when Donald Trump was first elected, liberal elites spent countless hours analyzing and debating the divide between their values and those of millions across America and Europe. If only we'd listen and feel empathy for Trump voters or Farage voters or Le Pen voters or AFD voters or Wilder's voters, then we could heal the world. Or so it was said, the educated elites didn't realize that their true betrayal had not been a failure of listening or empathy. It was not a lack of checking your privilege. It was a lack using your privilege, it's been a failure to genuinely contribute to society.

[00:25:59] So that is what I want to emphasize at the end of the first lecture in this series. This is not a story about a certain number of people. It's about a deeper failure of leadership across the Western world. A generation of elites. Has inherited extraordinary

privilege, access to the best education, the most powerful institutions, and used it not to serve the public, but to serve themselves.

[00:26:26] We've taught our best and brightest how to climb, but not what ladder is worth climbing. We've built a meritocracy of ambition without morality, of intelligence without integrity, and now we are reaping the consequences. Declining trust, rising cynicism. And a new generation that sees power as inherently corrupt and all virtue as performance.

Of course, not everyone in power is like this. Not all ambition today is hollow. There are still leaders and citizens trying to hold the line. Civil servants who resist political pressure, journalists who risk their safety for the truth, lawyers and judges who refuse to betray their principles. But they remain exceptions, outnumbered and outshouted. Their sparks have yet to catch fire.

[00:27:14] What we need now is not just better policies or better politicians. We need a moral revolution. We need to revive an ancient idea, almost laughable in today's climate, that the purpose of power is to do good. And that is the goal of this lecture series. To argue that the most urgent transformation of our time is not technological or geopolitical or industrial, but moral. We need a new kind of ambition, not for status, or wealth, or fame, but for integrity, courage, and public service, a moral ambition. This may sound And yet, it's precisely because things can get much worse that they can also get much better. History is not just a record of the declines. It's also full of astonishing turnarounds. In my next Reith Lecture, I will show how moral revolutions have shaped the past and how we can make it happen again.

(Applause)

Anita Anand [00:28:31] In a moment I'm going to open this up to the audience. I had a question for you. I mean you've been scathing about the rot that exists in the left and the right, your disappointment in political leadership. There are going to be those who say you know what, put your money where your mouth is, stand yourself...you have to be a politician. What would you say to that?

Rutger Bregman [00:28:53] Well, I think we can be a bit more ambitious than that. In my third lecture, I'll be talking about the Fabian Society, one of the great societies, great think-tanks, great movements that really revolutionized Britain and laid the foundation for social democracy in this country. They built a whole network of think-tanks of also political parties, including the Labour Party, that recruited talent, people who, well, in our day and age often go into these BS jobs but back then decided, you know what? I can use my ambition for better things. And I really think we need something similar today.

Look, what I've been fascinated by my whole career is how is it possible that small groups of thoughtful, committed citizens, as the great anthropologist Margaret Mead said, how can they change the world? Like, how does that happen? That's what I'm obsessed with. And I think we can do that again.

Anita Anand [00:29:45] Okay, well let's open this up to questions from the audience.

Phil Rosenberg [00:29:49] Phil Rosenberg, President of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, I think many of us will have a lot of sympathy with your concern, criticism, cynicism about the current political and corporate elites. But there is another rising force in our lands, which is malignant, and you've referred to it, extremism, whether the Islamist

extremists who launched a murderous attack at a synagogue, far-right hooligans who keep setting fire to mosques and are far worse, or far-left thugs who are... very good as you sort of describe it as breaking things up rather than building things up. And so how do we build and stimulate and excite the people of the moderate middle, the common good, to achieve the change that we need to see?

Rutger Bregman [00:30:28] So your point reminds me of the landscape of influencers, or perhaps I should say, man-fluencers that we have today. So on the right, we have idiots like Andrew Tate, right? But on the left, we had people like Luigi Mangione celebrated as some kind of leftist hero. And I found it disgusting, absolutely disgusting to see so many leftists and progressives celebrating the death of someone, you know, who has a family, it's just deeply, deeply worrying.

And what it made me think is that we've given up something here. Maybe it's about masculinity in this case, because we're talking about two guys, right? Everyone knows about toxic masculinity, right. And I think Luigi Mangione and Andrew Tate are good examples of that, of how you use your power for destruction. But if toxic masculinity is real, and I deeply believe it is, then the question is, what's the opposite of that? And I think the answer is pretty simple. It's heroic masculinity. Like our culture is full of stories of heroes from the Luke Skywalker's, to the Frodo's, to the Aragorn's of, again, connected to the point I made during my lecture, who use their power to do good. And I think we need way more influencers like that. And we need to give them way more attention. The tragic thing about social media as it currently is constructed is that it seems to be harder for that kind of heroic masculinity to go viral.

Anita Anand [00:31:59] Can I go back to the questioner, what is your take?

Phil Rosenberg [00:32:02] Well, I'm looking for answers really. I mean, it seems like we have a battle for the soul of our nation and the soul of other nations as well. I think it's probably something about, in what you say, about stimulating this heroic response that represents our values without being wicked to others. We need some of that special sauce to move it forward, I think.

Anita Anand: Thank you very much.

Sunder Katwala [00:32:21] Sundar Katwala from the think-tank British Future. I think the central sense I got from this first lecture is that you think the authoritarian populists you oppose have a much clearer sense of the future therefore than the alternative coalition you hope to rally. Does that mean you're telling us we should expect things to get worse before they get better?

Rutger Bregman [00:32:43] Well, what I really admire about a lot of authoritarian populists is their perseverance, their willingness to build these great coalitions. I mean, just look at the MAGA coalition in the US. I mean it's a very crazy coalition, right? Of Christian evangelicals, of the tech right, of people who don't believe in the germ theory of disease. I mean... It's very strange. But that is what it takes to build power. You work together with people who aren't quite different from you because you have a common goal. And then the perseverance, right? Look at something like the destruction of Roe v. Wade, the federal right to abortion. I mean I just deeply admire the long-term strategy behind that. They started in the late 80s, the early 90s, the Alliance for Defending Freedom. They launched hundreds of smaller lawsuits. It all built up to that big moment of the Dobbs decision. And at that very moment, what were all the pro-choice groups doing in the US? They were

canceling each other, you know, they were fighting one another. So yes, I think we can learn a thing or two, or people who want to preserve democracy can learn anything or two from those who are now trying to take it down.

Anita Anand [00:33:56] You're talking a lot about America. Now, Jennifer Ewing, you are with Republicans Abroad. That's right, isn't it?

Jennifer Ewing: Republicans Overseas UK.

Anita Anand: Republicans Overseas, thank you. I sound corrected. Now, from what you have heard, do you feel chastised? Do you feel unfairly portrayed? I mean, what do you say is going on?

Rutger Bregman [00:34:13] I was mostly dunking on my own people, wasn't I?

Jennifer Ewing [00:34:15] Yeah, I was actually going to say, thank you so much by the way, great lecture, you're kind of a populist, you know, a lot of what you were saying was challenging the elites and looking at these institutions that do not serve the people. Part of the reason that President Trump was elected about a year ago is not because he's perfect but because there's a large group of Working and middle-class American middle-class as we use the term that did not feel that the country was working for them anymore and they got together with a lot these other coalitions and kind of said, let's tear this down so I don't think it's the end of democracy, but I'm curious as to your views. I mean, you asked me to comment, so I commented rather than go straight to a question, but I guess what I'm wondering is you mentioned a lot of populists on the right, you know, here in this country and Germany and obviously in the U.S., but there's populism growing on the left as well. Do you not think that populism of left, right, you know, centre, whatever, serves a purpose.

Rutger Bregman [00:35:16] I absolutely do. And I increasingly think that we need, perhaps need, a Trump-like phenomenon on the American left today. If you just look at the Democratic Party, which is so unpopular, I don't think it's been ever been so unpopular as it is today, it is ripe for takeover basically, just like the way Donald Trump took over the Republican Party. Now you and I probably disagree about his policies, his politics. He's responsible for our massive tax cuts for his billionaire friends. I mean...I had a whole passage that I had to delete from the lecture because it was getting too long, but it was kind of fun to research from you know, so many criminals being pardoned, but also the meme coin that you read about that one, you know, just launch a coin in your own name. We have that form of populism as well. I don't think we'll reach agreement on that one. But I really like your point that indeed, there's a lot of value in that populist energy.

Anita Anand [00:36:24] Well, I mean, the microphone has moved, but yes, we can definitely say there is no agreement.

John Nixon [00:36:29] Thank you. Good evening. I'm John Nixon. I used to be a fundraiser and I'm now a philanthropist. Do you agree with me that in addition to the rich paying their fair share of tax? We need more of them to be more ambitious to become philanthropists to lead a revival of civil society, to restore social and economic justice and to reboot civil society because it's the bedrock of our democracy.

Anita Anand: Thank you

Rutger Bregman [00:36:58] My answer is yes. And a lot of people have hurt me, you know, dunk on philanthropists when I was at Davos. I said, you know stop whining about your philanthropy, start paying your taxes. I still stand by that but as a historian, I also know that there are beautiful exceptions. From the abolitionists, to the suffragettes, to the civil rights campaigners, these people were not funded by government. You know, they were a fighting government in most cases. So they needed brave men and women who used their privilege, who used our wealth to take on some of the greatest challenges we face.

Anita Anand [00:37:32] Just on philanthropy and having oodles of money. Let's come to you. I'm looking at you, Sir. Just say who you are.

Tom Hallett-Hughes [00:37:38] I'm Tom Hughes-Hallett and I'm the founder of the Marshall Institute for Philanthropy and Social Entrepreneurship at the London School of Economics. I think more importantly I had a BS job. I was a terrible banker and quite a successful one and managed to accumulate wealth and I gave myself a serious nervous breakdown by doing that. In 2000, JP Morgan and Chase bought the bank that I was a partner of. And I told my children that I was considering taking on another banking job. And they stopped and said, Dad, we wanted you to do something we can be proud of. And I realized that I'd wasted 30 years of my life. So my wife and I then committed the rest of our lives to moral revolution. We decided the only thing to do is to act. My question to you, therefore, is how are you going to instill a revolution from people who have power, have money and have ability but are allergic to politics and think-tanks and just want to get on and do it. How are you going to achieve that?

Rutger Bregman [00:38:51] I think that every great movement was grounded in a cultural shift, a more fundamental, deeper cultural shift, which was all about making doing good fashionable once again. I think this could be a kind of virus, a social virus that can spread. Let me illustrate it with one short story. I told at the beginning of this lecture that I've always been fascinated by resistance during the Second World War and endlessly ask myself that question: what would I have done?

For my previous book, I did a bunch of research into exactly that question, like what makes a resistance hero? And I expected that there would be some kind of psychology of resistance, right? Surely some people who had the courage to hide persecuted Jews in their cellars, for example, surely I don't know, maybe they were young or old or rich or poor or left-wing or right-wing. Surely there must have been something there, but the answer is no, there was nothing. This was a cross-sectional population. And hundreds of interviews have been done by researchers, and they couldn't really find anything after the war that suggested there was a kind of psychology.

Well, they did realize at some point that there was a sociology. So resistance was like a virus that spread. That explains why it wasn't spread out evenly across the country in which I was born, the Netherlands. And you know what? The most predictive factor was whether people had been *asked* to join the resistance. So, in 94% of all cases, when people... I've been asked to do the right thing, they said yes. So that's how I believe that moral revolutions can happen.

Anita Anand: Thank you.

John Geldert [00:40:26] My name is John Geldart, and I'm the wonderfully titled director general of the Institute of Directors in the UK. And we have a rather odd position because

we do seem to have the ear of government. Whether they listen is another matter. My question is, can business be a force for good?

Rutger Bregman [00:40:44] So I think it absolutely can. But what it should do is to look for its moral maximum instead of its moral minimum. What we've seen the past couple of years and decades is so many movements that have all been about like, hey, if we do this, like the bare minimum, maybe recycle our garbage, compensate our CO2 emissions, give a tiny, tiny fractions of our earnings to some kind of philanthropy that's basically just a form of sponsorship. Maybe then we're good people? No, we really got to up our game. Like I think business for good, if it really wants to be worth its name, yeah, it's gotta be looking for that moral maximum. How far can we take this? So at the organization I co-founded, the School for Moral Ambition, we're now incubating actually an initiative that's called Profit for Good. And we're setting a simple benchmark. Like for us, Profit For Good is donating 10% of your earnings to the most important movements of our time. I would love to see much more of that where business leaders aren't just talking a lot about their relatively unambitious attempts to do a tiny little bit of good, but where they're really trying to take risks and do so much more because that's what's necessary now.

Anita Anand [00:41:55] Did you want to come back on that?

John Geldert [00:41:57] Actually we would agree...with the principle there are bad actors in business as there are all bad actors all over the world. And there are many good actors as well. Julian Richer would immediately spring to mind as someone who is trying to do something for good. So I think that, my concern is by characterizing the many as being bad, the few may be missed and therefore unable, or unwilling, to join the movement.

Rutger Bregman [00:42:27] So this is about what motivates people. There are a lot of people who say shame doesn't work. I deeply disagree. I think shame works very well, often. It's always got to be a mix of different things, right? I think this movement, this moral revolution should be 80% enthusiasm and 20% shame and guilt. But like evolution has given us this for a reason. We are the only species, or one of the few at least, in the whole animal kingdom with the ability to blush. That tells us something about the power of shame and guilt.

Anita Anand [00:43:02] The woman in the middle, yes.

Suki Fuller [00:43:04] Suki Fuller, intelligence professional. The question I have has to do with technology because we haven't really addressed that, especially when we have technology bros basically mandating how the next generations react, behave, and where they find their moral compass. So how do you think that we are going to engage that generation that is being dumbed-downs, particularly when it comes to morality or questions of morality. Yeah. Where do you think we are going to be able to make that generation understand what morality is, what a moral revolution looks like, and how we can bring them into the fold?

Anita Anand: Thank you very much.

Rutger Bregman [00:43:54] So we are currently living through a moment in world history where a lot of baffling and worrying things are happening. Take the rise of the far right, which is happening across the world. Take the declining birth rates, which are happening pretty much everywhere. Not just in richer countries, but also in poorer countries and more religious countries and more atheist countries. So, when you look at such fundamental big

developments, you start to wonder, hey, maybe there is a deeper thing at work. Like, what could explain this happening in all those places at the same time? And I think that very often the answer will be technology, social media, smartphones, this profound force that is massively changing our lives and often for the worse.

Now, I think what we should really resist here is the determinism, the idea that, technology is just a force that happens to us and that we're not in control. There are a lot of people in Silicon Valley who would like us to believe That, that, hey, this is going to happen anyway. We can, you know, say all kinds of things at the BBC, in our parliaments, but that's not going to change a thing. That is honestly not what history teaches us. Technology is a force of humanity. It's being shaped by us.

One of my favorite examples is the invention of the birth control pill, which totally revolutionized obviously women's health, but also, you now, launched the second feminist revolution in the 1960s. Now, that was not. You know, something that was given to us by some magic force called technology. No, there was this small group of people, or in this case, actually one really determined suffragette and philanthropist called Katherine McCormick, who was like, I want to make that happen. Let's find the scientists who can do the innovation, make it work. And that arrived in the late sixties. It was called Innovid. And later we started calling it the pill because it was so revolutionary. And look, there are many, many stories out there. So I think What we need here is to once again see technology not as a force of nature, but as a force of humanity to say like, in the end, we are in control.

Anita Anand: Thank you

Bill Rammell [00:46:02] Bill Rammell, a minister in the last Labour government. Your critique of the social democratic left leadership across the world really chillingly resonated me. I much more comfortably listened to your critique of the populist right leadership. But do you not think part of the success of the populous right is identifying issues where there is a kernel of truth and concern to so many people... And I felt your reference to the 10% around migration neglected the fact that a successful left leadership has got to provide solutions to issues like that.

Rutger Bregman [00:46:39] Ok, so there's a difference to talk about here, which is a difference of roles, right? So I think that I, as a Reith Lecturer, can point out that it's rather pathetic that a whole continent that is very rich, very developed, is totally obsessing over this issue called immigration, even though technically, I deeply believe it's not the greatest challenge that we face as a species. On the other hand, if you're a politician, you gotta be a pragmatist a lot of the time and politics is for power. I deeply admire the pragmatism of people who are like, you know what, in the end, it's about winning, it's about actually achieving results. And that's the kind of mentality we need on the left right now. So if I would draw up, you now, just out of the top of my head would be what could be a winning agenda for social democrats across the West. It would be one, obviously, economic populism. Like we've seen that again and again. Who's the most popular politician in the US right now? Bernie Sanders. The reason is very simple. I mean, he just talks about stuff that people really like, whether that's Medicare for all or higher taxes on the rich. I mean that polls incredibly well. But then at the same time, you got to recognize that when it comes to cultural issues, the left has really moved way too far to the left. And this is just a recipe to keep losing elections again and again.

Anita Anand [00:48:00] Okay, but the question was specifically about immigration and a kernel of truth.

Rutger Bregman: That's where you need to moderate as well.

Anita Anand: Just to address that in particular, you know, there are people who do think it is a problem. They express it at the ballot box, they sometimes express it on the streets.

Rutger Bregman [00:48:16] So I think that the vast majority of people in this country and elsewhere think like, hey, we just want to be in control. So we're not like totally against immigration at all, as long as we're in control, there are some kind of quorum or whatever you call it. But what happened, for example, during the Biden administration is where the border was just completely out of control and hundreds of thousands of people were abusing the asylum process in the US, even though, you know, technically they would never be eligible to stay. It's reasonable that people are worried about that. And again, if you think that politics is about actually winning elections, it's not very wise to put your fingers in your ear and say, la, la, la, I don't care about this. As I said, politics is for power.

Anita Anand [00:49:00] And there's somebody I recognize from the world of politics, Theresa Villiers, Dame Theresa Villiers.

Theresa Villiers [00:49:06] I wouldn't entirely subscribe to the bleakness of your perception of the people who would aspire to govern us, but we all would like to see the kind of renewal of trust in our leaders that you've advocated. In the past, such movements drew on terms and concepts such as duty, patriotism, and Christianity. Do you see these playing a role in the moral revolution you want to create?

Rutger Bregman [00:49:32] Absolutely. The way I think about moral revolutions is that they're always coalitional affairs. Like we got to work together with people who are different from us. If someone agrees with you for 70 to 80 percent of the time, that person is your ally, not your enemy. And what has gone utterly wrong, especially among the left, is the development of a kind of moral purity, right? Is that we can only work together, with people who agree with us on a whole list of causes and ideas and opinions.

Sometimes, you know, the dark side of what they call intersectionality, right? In theory, that concept of like, hey, there are different ways in which people can get mistreated can be really powerful, right, can be a source of working together. But I think what often happens, and I try to say that in the lectures, that we, you know fragment into ever smaller moral circles, right. And we forget what politics is all about, which is building coalitions, gaining power, changing the world.

Anita Anand: Thank you very much.

Nizi Hassaid [00:50:33] I'm Nizi Hussaid from a start-up incubator called Telos House. I want to thank you for your speech, it was very interesting, but I think what I could feel was being discussed a lot of the times was this idea of goodness, of virtue, right? But it was like there's an underlying assumption that every single person has an intuitive sense of morality, an intuitive of sense of what goodness is. But if you look at, for example, I mean just at... What you mentioned earlier, right, with the overturning of Roe versus Wade, I mean, the Republicans fundamentally, they were driven by morality from their perspective. They believed that what they did was the right thing and perhaps some of them would say that that was a moral revolution. So I mean, if you're calling for a moral evolution, how do you, how do justify that if there's fundamentally no objective morality for that to be based on?

Rutger Bregman [00:51:23] Yeah, that's a great question, and a hard question. Abortion is an example of a very hard moral issue, and I think I'm personally pro-choice, but I think we have to take those on the other side very seriously, and think really hard about why do we think what we think. I don't think that human morality is anything goes, though. I've written a book called *Humankind*, which is about why we have conquered the globe. Why not the bonobos? Why not the chimpanzees? Like what makes us special as a species? And I think that it's been the result of a process that evolutionary psychologists call survival of the friendliest. So for millennia it was actually the friendliest among us who were best at cooperating with one another, who had more kids and passed on their genes to the next generation. That's the secret of our success and I think that's where our morality comes from. The desire to work together, to protect the weak, to recognize the inherent dignity of everyone. This connects to my earlier point about the need to expand the moral circle.

At the same time, you got to recognize that there are some others on the other side of the political spectrum. I mean, I had a whole part about JD Vance that I also had to delete, from, from the lecture was getting way too long, but yeah, he's a really good example of someone who showed that you can have a very different kind of morality that has a much smaller moral circle, so where he is like, hey, for example. Being an American is all about actually having been born here or having a connection to the soil itself. And that stands in contrast to a very different conception of what it means to be a British citizen or an American citizen, which is it's an idea, right? If you subscribe to certain ideas and values, then you're part of the community.

Anita Anand [00:53:09] Thank you. I'm going to ask a question about history in a moment, and I'm looking at you David Olusoga, so I'm going to bring you in on that. But let me pick up on one point. Do you really think that people wake up in the morning thinking, I'm a baddie, a moral monster?

Rutger Bregman [00:53:23] Sure. That's a very rare thing. So I agree with you. Like most of the great criminals in history, you know, from Lenin to Hitler were obviously motivated by a moral ideology or what they perceived as the right thing to do. That's very clear. So that's why also I wanted to be very clear about where I'm coming from, you now, as an old fashioned European social democrat who believes that it is our moral imperative to expand the circle, that that has been. The great source of moral progress in the last two centuries.

Anita Anand [00:53:55] Are we living in a more monstrous time now than we have in the past? David Olusoga, how monstrous are we compared to the past.

David Olusoga [00:54:04] I'd argue that we are..the aberrant period has been the period from 1945 until very recently of unique stability, where nations for the most part were not invaded, where annexations did not happen, borders did not shift across the map. And this is a return to reality. Most of history has been more like this than the previous 70 years.

I'm struck as I always am when I hear it by the Gramsci monsters quote. Because between Gramsci saying that the world he had known was ending and the new world was struggling to be born, between him saying that and the birth of that new world, was a war that killed 70 million people. I mean, the thought that keeps swirling around in my mind is, do we take warnings as a species? Are we empiricists? Do we have to go through the fire in order to reach the redemption on the other side?

Rutger Bregman [00:55:00] For me, the most fundamental lesson of history has always been that things don't have to be this way. They can radically change, for the better or for the worse. So every milestone of civilization that we take for granted today, and we've been talking about them, the end of slavery, women's rights, the women's right to vote, the welfare state, the enormous prosperity we have today. I mean, all of that was unimaginable sometime. We live in the utopia of the past, that people imagined.

But indeed, it could also get so much worse. This is such a simple thing, but it's so easy to forget, is that the people who lived in the past didn't know how their story was going to end, right? So if you live in 1933, you don't know, how the story of Nazi Germany is going to be end. There's the great Kierkegaard quote that life has to be understood backwards, but it has to lived forwards. So we are in that moment right now of extraordinary historical flexibility. Can we learn from the past? Or do we have to experience these tragedies again? Obviously, I really hope not.

And what gives me that hope is I'm a big believer in historical contingency. So there are some historians who would say like, look, in the end, it's just the hard laws of history, it's geography, it is demography, it is technology. I mean, we humans, we are mere puppets of the big thing called history. And I think there's real power in that analysis I think that's true for a lot of the time. But we still have agency, there are still contingency, there are examples of small groups of people, of individuals who just made a massive difference and were able to steer the direction of history in a much more positive direction.

Anita Anand [00:56:47] You promised us misery for this first lecture, you couldn't help yourself, you ended on a hopeful note. Next time, we're going to be in Liverpool, where Rutger is going to talk about the 18th century abolition of slavery. That is going be the centerpiece of your next lecture. One of the greatest historical lessons of all time, is how you've put it, showing how small groups can change the world. But for now, our thanks to our audience here in London, and especially to our Reith Lecturer, Rutger Bregman.

(Applause)