

### Books and arts



#### REVIEW

**The Rational Optimist: How Prosperity Evolves.** By Matt Ridley.

## Getting better all the time

**T**HIRTY years ago, Julian Simon and Paul Ehrlich entered into a famous bet. Mr Simon, a libertarian, was sceptical of the gloomy claims made by Mr Ehrlich, an ecologist best known for his predictions of environmental chaos and human suffering that would result from the supposed "population bomb". Thumbing his nose at such notions as resource scarcity, Mr Simon wagered that the price of any five commodities chosen by Mr Ehrlich would go down over the following decade. The population bomb was defused, and Mr Simon, author of the now famous book "It's Getting Better all the Time" (2000), handily won the bet.

Now, Matt Ridley has 9 bet in mind. A well-known British science writer (and former *Economist* journalist), Mr Ridley has taken on the mantle of rational optimism from the late Mr Simon. In his new book, he challenges those preachers of negativity who argue that the world cannot possibly feed 9 billion mouths, that Africa is destined to fail and that the planet is heading for a climate disaster. He boldly predicts that in 2110, a much bigger world population could enjoy more and better food produced on less land than is used by farming today – and even return lots of farmland to wilderness.

10, mankind cannot hope to achieve this if it turns its back on innovation. Feeding another 2 billion people or more will, of course, mean producing much more food. Genetically modified (GM) agriculture could play an important role, as this technology can greatly increase yields while using smaller inputs of fertiliser, insecticide and water. Many years of field experience in the Americas and Asia have shown GM crops to be safe, but, Mr Ridley rightly complains, the Luddites<sup>1)</sup> of the green and organic movements 11.

The progress (and occasional retardation) of innovation is the central theme of Mr Ridley's sweeping work. He starts by observing that humans are the only species capable of innovation. Other animals use tools, and some ants, for example, do specialise at certain tasks. But these skills are not cumulative, and

the animals in question do not improve their technologies from generation to generation. Only man innovates continuously.

Why should that be? Some have suggested that perhaps it is the chemistry of big brains that leads us to tinker. Others that man's mastery of language or his capacity for imitation and social learning hold the key. Mr Ridley, a zoologist by training, weighs up these arguments but insists, in the end, that the explanation lies not within man's brain but outside: innovation is 12. Trade, Mr Ridley claims, is the spark that lit the fire of human imagination, as it made possible not only the exchange of goods, but also the exchange of ideas. Trade also encouraged specialisation, since it rewarded individuals and communities who focus on areas of comparative advantage.

It is this culture of continuous improvement, which was only accelerated by the industrial revolution, that explains the astonishing improvements in the human condition over time.

As Mr Simon did in his classic work, Mr Ridley provides ample statistical evidence here to show that life has indeed got better for most people in most places on most measures. Whether one counts air and water pollution in California or vaccination rates in Bangladesh or life expectancy in Japan, his conclusion is indisputable. It does, however, highlight one of the book's minor flaws: an over-anxious cramming in of too many obscure statistics and calculations that should have been relegated to footnotes or an annex.

Another is the author's slightly unfair attitude towards government. Mr Ridley makes it abundantly clear that he is a free marketeer, and he provides ample evidence from history that governments are often incompetent and anti-innovation.

He is right that the leaden hand of the state has often suppressed individual freedom and creativity. However, he does not fully acknowledge that some problems do, in fact, 13 — especially because markets themselves can sometimes fail spectacularly.

Mr Ridley is also generally sceptical about global warming, and worries that government policies advocated by greens today will be like treating a nosebleed by putting a tourniquet around one's neck. He argues that the problem, if it 14, will be solved by bottom-up innovation in energy technologies. But to accomplish that, he wants governments to "enact a heavy carbon tax, and cut payroll taxes."

That is a sensible prescription (often advocated by this newspaper), but surely a "heavy" tax suggests there is a role for government in fixing market failures?

15, he is on the mark with the big things. "The bottom-up world is to be the great theme of this century," declares Mr Ridley in the closing pages of this sunny book. He is surely right. Thanks to the liberating forces of globalisation and Googlisation, innovation is no longer the preserve of technocratic elites in ivory towers. It is increasingly an open, networked and democratic endeavour.

*The Economist, 2010*

noot 1 Luddites: people who oppose technical or technological change

## Tekst 5 Getting better all the time

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*Kies bij iedere open plek in de tekst het juiste antwoord uit de gegeven mogelijkheden.*

1p 9

- A a highly explosive
- B an economically profitable
- C an ethically justifiable
- D a similarly audacious

1p 10

- A Besides
- B However
- C Moreover
- D Therefore

1p 11

- A are ignorant of technological inventions
- B continue to obstruct advances in this field
- C do not care about preventing global famine
- D have demonstrated otherwise

1p 12

- A a collective phenomenon
- B a genetic process
- C an evolutionary precondition
- D a scientific concept

1p 13

- A call for a global approach
- B cause irreparable damage
- C grow beyond a government's potential
- D require government intervention

1p 14

- A exists at all
- B is dealt with promptly
- C is ignored completely

1p 15

- A After all
- B Indeed
- C Still

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### Bronvermelding

*Een opsomming van de in dit examen gebruikte bronnen, zoals teksten en afbeeldingen, is te vinden in het bij dit examen behorende correctievoorschrift, dat na afloop van het examen wordt gepubliceerd.*