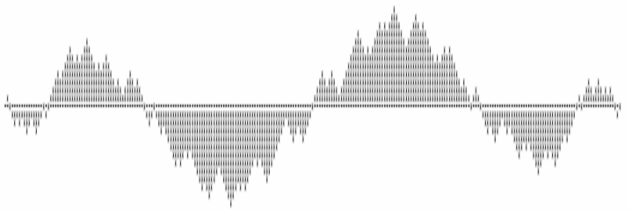
The Path of Humanity



Societal Innovation
for the World of Tomorrow

Henk Diepenmaat

Parthenon

Foreword by Jacqueline Cramer

In your hands is a *magnum opus* by Henk Diepenmaat. It is a rich and substantial book, in which the author takes the reader on a fascinating journey along *the path of humanity*. The book's central idea is that the course of human development has been erratic but, over the long term, upwards. The path that our development is following has given the book its name. According to Henk, we can refine this upwards pattern even more, and with greater focus.

We started as a society of hunter-gatherers and through the phases of agricultural societies and city states have landed in the modern nation state. That was a path of trial and error. We are now at another point of transition. Our current late-modern society consists of more and more actors, increasingly climbing their own individual 'improvement peaks', according to the author, and the gaps, walls, and tensions between all these actors are unmistakably increasing. The book is structured around the argument that, despite this growing fragmentation in the shorter term, we are nevertheless growing towards a new phase in our societal development. This is, in Henk's words, 'the plurimodern society of Team World'. The quality of this society is much higher than ours, and, he says, we can absolutely facilitate and accelerate its achievement.

You may have a lot of questions at this point: what is this Team World, how does it work exactly, can that actually be done, isn't that rather optimistic, and how will it happen? I understand. It sounds abstract and even utopian. But Henk paints a colourful picture of our societal development along *the path of humanity* with broad brushstrokes. The developments in particular sectors, including construction, healthcare, and the financial world, are outlined in terms of this path, often with help from experts in these fields. And once you start to read you'll notice that the author builds his argument clearly and systematically in order to answer the above questions. Rather than simply stating or hoping that our future society will be better, with this book he aims to give a well-grounded argument for why he expects it will be better.

The nice thing about the book is that the reader is immersed in a sea of information without losing the way. This is because the book is based on a copious arsenal of scientific knowledge and insights, yet its more narrative sections read like a novel, thanks to the informal writing style and the mix of scientific reflections and his personal life experiences. Anecdotes about fixing a flat tyre and his son being startled to find a scorpion under his pillow bring the abstract explanations back down to earth. In essence, the author has the reader take his or her own journey. Its building blocks vary from the personal and familiar to highly abstract. Some readers will feel right at home reading about how academic scholarship functions and what the advantages and disadvantages of specialization are. Some will find his analysis of objective–subjective, rationality–irrationality, and material–mental relationships, and the importance of finding a balance between them compelling. Yet others will enjoy the theoretical adaptation of his 'societal balance model', his criticism of chains of production and consumption, or his typology of six innovation methods built

around the notion of societal balance (or lack thereof) that results. Or his description and explanation of Benford's and Zipf's pattern laws. Or the sawtooth and wave patterns that he distils from the number line that he uses to explain why he thinks (as a non-mathematician) that the Riemann hypothesis holds true. It's this interdisciplinary breadth that makes this book fascinating for a diverse range of interested people.

The intriguing thread running through the book is that while you read it, you are presented with a developed philosophy of society that the author uses to provide an explanation for the nature of our societal path of development: ***recursive perspectivism***. In a nutshell, according to recursive perspectivism, our societies consist of actors, and actors consist of perspectives. Hard figures, statistics, and prime numbers are introduced into our discussions of how we think about society. If you throw a dice, the pattern is random and unpredictable in the short term. But with all its irregularity, in the very long term, the average nevertheless moves unmistakably and inevitably towards 3½. Similarly, human actors, capricious and inconsistent in their short-term actions, together follow a long-term path of preference in what Henk calls a perspectivist space (an idea already presented in his doctoral dissertation). This makes it easy to see why at the largest scales our long-term societal development can follow a path to improvement without we humans driving it, and even without our consciously realizing it. Some forms of society turn out to be stable, others not, and this is also elucidated in terms of perspective.

The author's ultimate goal is to make a contribution to the methodological insights that make further societal improvement possible. His reasoning is that we are not good at understanding large societal practices, because of the multiplicity of actors who each act from their own perspective. Henk contends that he can see this complexity much better using the multi-actor approach that he developed in his previous works, and he gives a variety of examples. When you read them, the world indeed looks much more manageable. Societal practice is of course much less manageable than a structured reality. Unfortunately, it's hard to know which perspectives really matter. Furthermore, people are not always willing to see things from another's perspective, and prefer to stick to their own mental frameworks. Henk acknowledges this but also emphasizes that we have to keep our efforts focused on arriving at a more connected and partly shared understanding of different perspectives. After all, a better society is the result of greater cooperation in the right kind of coherence. Our history demonstrates this unambiguously, and this, according to him, is precisely what characterizes *the path of humanity*.

Henk stresses that he aims to stay far from dogma and from creating the impression that he thinks he knows better. But a book like this cannot be entirely value free. The author aims to address your own life experience. Starting with shared societal life experiences, you'll look together at the historical practice of societal development. At the same time the book aims to improve society by catalysing innovation in society. The nature of societal innovation gets ample treatment by the end of the book. Here as well, the perspective he takes is that of historical development. Using a description of the incremental development

of environmental policy and sustainable development, he outlines what societal innovation is essentially about: from a one-issue approach, through accumulating interests and needs (including their internal frictions), to a far-reaching synthesis of various aspects of sustainable development in multi-actor coherence and cooperation. He introduces several methods for giving form and content to societal improvement. It is all engagingly clarified while you read.

The Path of Humanity: *Societal Innovation for the World of Tomorrow* is a fine mix of theory, practice, and the author's personal experiences. It's an aggregation of all the insights that Henk has had in his 30-year career, drawing on his first research at the Dutch research institute TNO, his dissertation, the practical knowledge from his multi-actor consultancy, his part-time involvements with universities, his previous books, and his role as a bearer and transferer of knowledge. The book has become an enriching and honest source of inspiration that can help the reader to do what is necessary to help him or her along the path of being human.

With my experience in politics, societal practice, and academia, I realized that there are many obstacles along our shared path, and that sometimes we have to take many winding roads. Whether we get there or not does not lie in one person's hands but is a collective process. Although human development will always be somewhat haphazard, Henk has set out a clear long-term path of progress, unclouded by the issues of the day in our societal practice, by thinking deeply about societal development. His ideas and arguments shed an exceptional light on the fluctuations of human development up to the present day and represent a highly optimistic route to our future. It's encouraging to see that we've more or less been able to follow this path in human history thus far, with the attractive and less-attractive sides it entails. Henk offers ideas and methods that can help. *The Path of Humanity* can spark renewed thinking about the nature of our societal development, and what we can do together.

Jacqueline Cramer
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Amsterdam, September 2016

Preface by the author

This book explores the principles of our societal development. When I say 'our', I mean humanity as a whole. When I use the word 'societal', I include structural, configurational characteristics of our societies on top of substantive social characteristics. Exploring these principles can help us to better understand our collective history up to now. But more importantly, the purpose of this book is to enable us to further improve our societies with greater focus in the future. We are nearing a crucial phase in our history as humanity. The cracks in the cement of our societies are showing, and we cannot take it for granted that things will be better in the near future than they are now. However, we do have some choice in the matter – but we'll have to make intelligent choices. This book attempts to throw some light on just what making these intelligent choices for our future entails.

The book pushes some envelopes, and it chooses some unconventional routes. Human societal development is perhaps the vastest and most multifaceted subject there is to explore. Nevertheless, the central hypothesis of this book is that this massive development is constructed from a single building block. I call this building block 'perspective'. Every perspective consists of three components: an initial situation, a process of change, and a resulting situation. For example, you start off at home, then you get in the car and drive, and finally you're visiting your parents. Or let's say we are currently exhausting and contaminating our planet, then we take measures, and thus, in the future, we have a sustainable world again.

Perspectives can also be composite, recurring at a smaller or larger scale, in space (like two Lego blocks forming one larger one), time (like the series of smaller actions that go into fixing a flat bike tyre: the result of one is the beginning of the next), or in any way at all. That is why I call the concept of perspectives, which are both repeated and nested at several scale levels, 'recursive perspectivism' (recursive = recurring in a similar form). Everywhere, perspectives are meshed and interlinked. For example, driving your diesel car to visit your parents is praiseworthy, but it also has an element of unsustainability. And how else should we define societal patterns if not as experiencing, linking, and passing through huge networks of perspective?

Recursive perspectivism involves a far-reaching generalization. It functions as a unification methodology and applies to societies as well as to other phenomena. While writing this book, I often thought of a quote by the quantum physicist Wolfgang Pauli: '*This paper is so bad it is not even wrong.*' Pauli is referring to the positing of theories that are formulated so sloppily that it is impossible to even prove that they are false – the gutter of human thought. Although the workings of recursive perspectivism may sound quite abstract so far, you can observe its effects all around you, if you know how to look. Examples of it are Zipf's Law and Benford's Law (two laws governing statistical patterns observable in our environment), and the largest pattern of all: *the path of humanity*, the historical development of our societies.

I developed recursive perspectivism to describe as many phenomena as possible using as few concepts as possible. At first, perspective is as slippery and hard to grasp as a piece of soap in a full bathtub. But if you learn to work with it, a whole new way of looking at consciousness and societal processes reveals itself. Perspective, in its farthest-reaching interpretation, lies at the basis of human experience: everything we experience is experienced as recursive perspective. It constructs our consciousness, our needs and desires, and the logic of our intentions. Perspective is at the basis of situations, of change, of time and space, of subject and object, large and small, and mind and matter (an idea put forth by Spinoza as well as Pauli, who is mentioned above) – and also of our human societal development in its entirety.

I'm not a fan of absolute and eternal truths in general. But if you nevertheless accept that such a highly universal building block as recursive perspective is a fruitful and workable idea – and I do in this book and this series – it leads to many new pragmatic insights. These insights look simple at first, but they quickly cut across the range of academic disciplines. They start with philosophy and go through science all the way to the practices making up our daily lives (and back again). They link physics and psychology and sociology and management to mathematics. They result in continuous, qualitative, entropic, quantum-theoretical, and relativistic implications. This is actually logical if you assume that just one building block underlies everything, but it's also quite impressive if you're working on it. You see, I'm far from a master in all these fields. Yet in thinking, working, reading, writing, and looking around, I come to the conclusion that there are actually many more reasons to embrace the idea of recursive perspectivism and use it pragmatically than to reject it.

I outline how the entirety of human development, from the prehistoric Laetoli footsteps to today, and further into the future, is also given form by recursive perspective and is thereby subject to *clear-cut statistical balance principles*. These balance principles can only be seen well in perspective, at huge spatial and temporal scales. They explain many societal developments that we can observe around us, in such sectors as healthcare, construction, education, transportation, agriculture and food, and many more. I will also outline these developments (many people have helped me with this). If we start to recognize them for what they are – structural developments in network structures of actors and perspective, we can start to make better use of them, and the odds will be highest that things will be better for us in the future.

This book explores the development of our world – our society – as a structure of recursive perspective that is partly bubbling along, partly turbulent, and partly chaotic, with the ultimate goal a better understanding and more conscious guiding of our shared human development. This book is Volume V of the *Society in Perspective* series (published in Dutch as *Maatschappij in perspectief*; this book is the only volume translated into English thus far). The series is preluded by my dissertation and is the product of a long process of thought, work, and personal growth. It has been a fascinating voyage of discovery, but now and then also a harsh one, often shared with others but at times also lonely and alone. In some places, the book is highly intuitive and sometimes frankly speculative, and in others, it touches on

experiences familiar to us all. Ultimately it aims to make our journey to a better future easier to navigate.

The book is built on many concepts drawn from other people's ideas, works, and theories. I may not have grasped some of their finer points, and I often have only a mediocre comprehension of them. If I have not properly acknowledged someone else's genuinely original quote or idea, I would like to apologize for a lack of a source reference. I would also like to apologize if I have interpreted the work of others too idiosyncratically, or even erroneously, but please read the quote by John Stuart Mill from *On Liberty* at the end of this preface before drawing too harsh a conclusion.

A society does not improve if it *only* thinks cautiously. I think that the culture of intellectual 'claims', such as the intellectual-property battles currently prevailing in sectors of industry and science, has gotten entirely out of hand and is squarely blocking the way to society making any decisive progress. I suspect that this also applies to claim cultures of the non-intellectual kind. I personally think that recursive perspectivism is my modest contribution to *the path of humanity*, but above all my hope is that many people will incorporate it in thinking productively and working towards improving society. After all, what is an intellectual-property claim worth, compared with improving our world?

This book might not ever have been written if I'd followed the rules of scientific scholarship. But some great scientists also have a crystal-clear explanation for why books like this have a right to exist. I'll close this preface with a quote from Erwin Schrödinger, one of the developers of quantum mechanics (a theory I often thought about while writing this book), that expresses this very nicely:

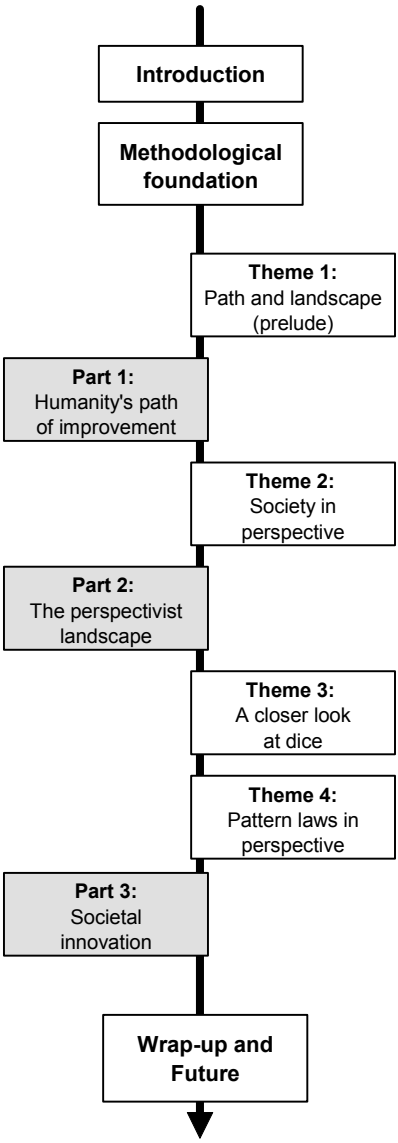
A scientist is supposed to have a complete and thorough knowledge, at first hand, of some subjects and, therefore, is usually expected not to write on any topic of which he is not a master. This is regarded as a matter of noblesse oblige. *For the present purpose I beg to renounce the noblesse, if any, and to be freed of the ensuing obligation. My excuse is as follows: We have inherited from our forefathers the keen longing for unified, all-embracing knowledge. The very name given to the highest institutions of learning remind us, that from antiquity and throughout many centuries, the universal aspect has been the only one to be given full credit. But the spread, both in width and depth, of the multifarious branches of knowledge during the last hundred odd years has confronted us with a queer dilemma. We feel clearly that we are only now beginning to require reliable material for welding together the sum total of all that is known into a whole; but, on the other hand, it has become next to impossible for a single mind to fully command more than a small specialized portion of it. I can see no other escape from this dilemma (lest our true aim be lost forever) than that some of us should venture to embark on a synthesis of facts and theories, albeit with second-hand and incomplete knowledge of some of them – and at the risk of making fools of ourselves. So much for my apology.*
(Erwin Schrödinger, preface to *What Is Life?*, 1944)

These are wise words. Therefore, I am deliberately taking the risk described by Schrödinger, supported in part by the quote by John Stuart Mill below. I invite you to run this risk with me. With this book and this series, I present a widely applicable building block and a unifying methodology to more consciously shape *the path of humanity*, our shared path, in the future. Given the enormity of the subject, a small amount of humility may be in order, but this book and series support and propagate a single message: an enormous field of societal improvement perspective is out there, for whoever is interested. We have so much to gain, as humanity and as society.

Henk Diepenmaat
Zeist, Christmas Eve 2015

Truth gains more even by the errors of one who, with due study and preparation, thinks for himself, than by the true opinions of those who only hold them because they do not suffer themselves to think. Not that it is solely, or chiefly, to form great thinkers, that freedom of thinking is required. On the contrary, it is as much, and even more indispensable, to enable average human beings to attain the mental stature which they are capable of. There have been, and may again be, great individual thinkers, in a general atmosphere of mental slavery. But there never has been, nor ever will be, in that atmosphere, an intellectually active people.

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859)



The structure of this book

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