

Rutger Bregman's Utopia for Centrists

“Free money for everyone” is about as pithy as a slogan for a [capitalist path to communism](#) can get. It is also the original title, in Dutch, of Rutger Bregman's *Utopia for Realists* (Little, Brown and Company, 2017). The English-language title with its seemingly contradictory terms better reflects the basic dialectic of Bregman's book: every utopia is its own dystopia and progress consists in seeking out each successive utopia. He laments that things are so good within our current late-capitalist dys-utopia that we've stalled as a society and people are no longer looking to the horizons for what comes next. He argues for three reforms as paths forward: a 15-hour workweek, a universal basic income (UBI), and open borders.

I love all three proposals. They each bear what I consider to be the hallmark of potentially transformative reform: it is equally easy to consider them as lofty-but-possible goals under the current system and as the early *results* of revolutionary structural changes. But while they sound like radical reforms, Bregman never fails to insist that they are actually commonsense, evidence-based policy tweaks that any economic-minded conservative would support. In trying to balance his Utopia with his Realism, however, Bregman often loses grasp of his dialectic and ends in contradiction rather than transcendence. The book is a roller coaster of revolutionary idealism (“If we want to change the world, we need to be unrealistic, unreasonable, and impossible” (264)) punctually contradicted by reassurances that everything is already going

according to plan (“Don’t get me wrong, capitalism is a fantastic engine for prosperity” (46)) in confusing service to sympathetic but quite tame social democratic sentiment. Bregman opens his book with a slew of statistics in praise of capitalism compared to how bad things used to be. (Steven Pinker’s endorsement on the cover makes perfect sense after reading the first chapter.^[1]) As one reviewer noted, “His frame of reference never strays far from neoliberal economic dogma and there is not a single suggested societal change in his book which is not primarily justified by economic benefit.”

One of my favorite sentences comes from [the chapter on reducing the workweek to 15 hours](#): “Is there anything that working less does *not* solve?” (142). In that chapter Rutger rightly observes that, unlike the expectations of many noted commentators (“Marx to Mill to Keynes to Ford”), industrial automation has not provided most of the world with a life of luxury. He quote’s from *Principles of Political Economy* to demonstrate John Stuart Mill’s optimism about the potential of technology to reduce work. The paragraph he quotes from, however, is actually pessimistic about the social prospects of technology unless capitalist accumulation can be halted. It continues:

Hitherto [1848] it is questionable if all the mechanical inventions yet made have lightened the day’s toil of any human being. They have enabled a greater population to live the same life of drudgery and imprisonment, and an increased number of manufacturers and others

to make fortunes.

It is interesting that Rutger chose to quote that particular paragraph from Mill's *Principles*, because Karl Marx (another of Rutger's 'great minds' supposedly optimistic about capitalist automation) also quotes it to open [the chapter about machinery in *Capital*](#). (“[Reducing work] is, however, by no means the aim of the capitalistic application of machinery...”). Marx's point is that machinery, as long as capitalist production dominates, will necessarily be designed to extract profit from workers rather than to provide them with luxury. It's clear that advances in technology *could* free us from all kinds of work—but up until now it has been largely wasted by and on capitalism.

Rutger freely criticizes the culture and excesses of actually existing capitalism, but he does so without presenting a coherent theory of capitalist exploitation, Marxian or otherwise. This leaves his critique feeling very shallow, vacillating between mere reformism and capitalist outright apologism. In explaining why people have no time in capitalist societies he repeats the old bourgeois explanation that “Economic growth can yield either more leisure or more consumption,” (139) and as a society we have chosen the latter. Of course there is a third sink for the output of increased productivity that he does not mention, namely: profit. By eliding that option the blame for the failures of capitalism to live up to its own ideals is implicitly placed on workers instead of owners. In the same breath Rutger mentions the fact that “inequality has exploded,” but he does not provide a convincing explanation for that explosion. Outside of briefly mentioning Piketty's purely descriptive model (whom he approvingly quotes that “We have to save capitalism from the capitalists”), his best try is less than satisfactory (and seems to

get the causality of inequality and capital concentration reversed):

The reality is that it takes fewer and fewer people to create a successful business, meaning that when a business succeeds, fewer and fewer people benefit. (Chapter 8; no corroborating source is given, but he names Instagram as an example)

The most disappointing self-reversal occurs in the conclusion to the chapter on the 15-hour workweek. After persuasively arguing against work he assures his conservative readers that “the objective here is not to plead for an end to the workweek. Quite the reverse. It’s time that women, the poor and seniors get the chance to do more, not less, good work.” (147) As I’ve written before, [any scheme which promises to improve life by giving poor women more work to do ought to be met and examined with the utmost suspicion](#). Giving more work, however ‘good,’ to the most overworked and underpaid members of the global economy is not utopian. It’s not progressive. It’s just embracing the same old exploitative and horrific capitalism we already have. Given my understanding of microcredit as a mechanism to integrate poor women further into the workforce, however, I do appreciate that in [the chapter on open borders](#) he points out that “there is no hard evidence that microcredit is effective at combatting poverty and illness. Handing out cash works way better.” (211)

That chapter contains more of my favorite lines, including his description of the effects of border regimes: “It’s apartheid on a

global scale.” (221) But it also contains the characteristic self-contradictions. He first spends some time dispelling the myth that immigrants “will undermine social cohesion,” and then a few pages later he develops doubts about the resilience of his utopia: “Opening our borders is not something we can do overnight, of course — nor should it be. Unchecked migration would certainly corrode social cohesion in the Land of Plenty.” (228)

But it is nice, at least, to see UBI and the other ameliorations getting attention in a popular book. And, anyway, his target audience is not the convinced socialist but the skeptical liberal. The book originated as a series of articles for the *Correspondent*, a Dutch news website, and is written in a correspondingly engaging style peppered with narrative anecdotes. But anyone looking for a scholarly treatment will be disappointed in its fluffiness. There is no bibliography, no particular methodology is revealed in a perusal of the end notes, and the few times I was surprised or doubtful enough about a [minor] claim to consult the notes they were less than helpful. To the claim that some scientists think there are people alive today who will live to 1,000 years, for example, the supporting note is simply a link to a single TED Talk.

While I enjoyed several sections of the book (like [the fun chapter on Nixon’s guaranteed income plan](#) which I had never read about before), his mixed message left me with a mixed response. On one hand his selection of pet reforms is so good that it is not *just* another book on saving capitalism by giving it a gentler face. But they are good reforms pursued for the wrong reasons.

It is time for UBI, short workweeks, and open borders, yes, but

that is because it is (still) time to move beyond capitalism and grand systems of exploitation, not to try to shore them up for another ten generations. Bregman talks about pushing the Overton window to the left (or in whichever direction he thinks Utopia lies) but pairs the '68 slogan “Be realistic, demand the impossible” with his myopic praise of capitalism. In the epilogue he exhorts his readers to engage in what he calls Politics with a capital “P” which is “Not about the art of the possible, but about making the impossible inevitable.” (253) A book inspired by that philosophy would have been a less frustrating read.

[1] In [an interview with Vox's Ezra Klein](#), Bregman made an interesting remark about Pinker: “It seems quite ironic to me that the Steven Pinkers of today don’t like social justice warriors. The great achievements that they’re so happy about have often been achieved by the social justice warriors of the past.”