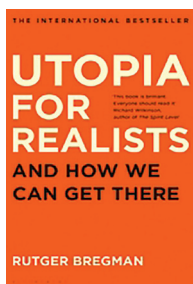


Life & Times Books

Utopia for Realists: and How We Can Get There

Rutger Bregman

Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017, HB, 336pp,
£16.99, 978-1408890264



A NEW SOURCE OF HOPE

Some might say that the title of this book has an oxymoronic quality: can a realist believe that a Utopia is achievable? By the end of the argument I remained uncertain, but there is no doubting the author's command of his evidence or his degree of commitment to his cause. Bregman is described as 'one of Europe's most prominent young thinkers'; and this book became a bestseller in his native Netherlands when first published in 2014. The translation by Elizabeth Manton is easy to read, and maintains what I assume to be the sharp and witty style of the original.

The author begins by characterising current developed economies as lands of plenty, akin to the legendary Cockaigne of medieval imagination, in which hunger, pestilence, and destitution have been to all intents and purposes abolished. Our life expectancy, health, and wealth are unprecedented in human history, and yet

there is a great malaise at large. Inequality has reached preposterous levels; those in work are often stressed and lack a sense of purpose; relative poverty and unemployment remain stubbornly persistent; and the shadow of increasing automation looms over us, threatening a huge number of jobs across the economy. Bregman's aim is not to predict the future, but, 'to fling open the windows of our minds', by positing an alternative model to the ruthless capitalism and materialism of today.

Central to his vision is the introduction of a Universal Basic Income (UBI), combined with a shorter working week. He devotes much of the book to describing various historical attempts to put such a system in place, from the Speenhamland system, named after an English village where this form of poor relief was introduced in the early 19th century, via several small-scale experiments in North America, to Richard Nixon's Family Assistance Plan, launched to Congress in 1970 but rescinded at the last minute because of sabotage by certain right-wing advisers. He pays particular attention to controlled experiments, and the evidence for the positive results of nearly all of them is convincing. Along the way, the myth of the 'undeserving poor' is effectively demolished, and the iniquities of our current welfare model (as exemplified in the UK system of disability benefit assessments) are laid bare. In the Netherlands the idea of the UBI is being widely discussed, and I see in the *Guardian* that the Canadian province of Ontario is just about to launch another experimental programme.¹

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He also makes a plea for a rebalancing of our educational system so that the teaching of values, rather than of 'competencies', becomes central (does this ring any bells in the medical establishment?). Turning to less developed economies, he advocates direct gifts of money for the poor to use as they choose, rather than the patronising and often ineffective aid programmes beloved by Western governments; and he makes a bold plea — which in Brexit Britain is unlikely to meet with much sympathy — for the opening of borders, to the benefit of both poor and rich countries.

If you are happy with the status quo, don't bother with this book. But if you feel that things really could be better but you're short of inspiration, then read it. You may find some of the ideas it contains of doubtful practicality, but you will certainly be stimulated and entertained.

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REFERENCE

1. Kassam A. Ontario plans to launch universal basic income trial run this summer. *Guardian* 2017; 24 Apr: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/24/canada-basic-income-trial-ontario-summer> [accessed 11 May 2017].

