

# Book Review: Utopia for Realists and How We Can Get There by Rutger Bregman

*With Utopia for Realists and How We Can Get There, Rutger Bregman offers a new blueprint for constructing a better society for all, advocating the implementation of seemingly 'utopian' ideas, such as universal basic income, along the way. This is an assured and ambitious book, writes Peter Carrol, that deserves to be widely read.*

**Utopia for Realists and How We Can Get There. Rutger Bregman (trans. Elizabeth Mentone). Bloomsbury. 2017.**

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Record-high life expectancies, technological advances, military conflicts at historic lows and the unprecedented levels of wealth in developed economies all suggest that we are living through a golden age of humanity. For Rutger Bregman, a 29-year-old Dutch historian and author of *Utopia for Realists and How We Can Get There*, our arrival at 'the land of plenty' means that the most pressing challenge for humanity is moving to a new stage of capitalism and creating a better society for everyone.

Bregman's starting point is recognising the flaws within the existing system. *Utopia for Realists* offers a wide-ranging critique of the individualism necessitated by the broken deregulated neoliberal economic model. Dangerously dysfunctional long before the 2007-08 financial crisis, modern capitalism is making us depressed, indebted and spiritually bereft. As Bregman writes:

A culture that encourages us to spend money we don't have on stuff we don't need, in order to impress people we can't stand. Then we go and cry on a therapist shoulder. That's the dystopia we live in today.

Bregman cites LSE anthropologist David Graeber's work on the phenomenon of 'bullshit jobs': the fields of marketing, public relations and the array of administrative positions across the public and private sectors. Most people are painfully aware of the worthlessness of the contribution of their work: Bregman cites a poll where 37 per cent of the UK workforce believes their jobs are 'bullshit'.

Capitalism's spoils, Bregman writes, have therefore become alarmingly skewed away from those who 'add and create value' to those who 'hold value and shift it around'. In countries with dominant financial centres, like the UK and the US, this has led to growing and dangerous levels of economic inequality.

Do capitalism's wages reflect the value of the work? In one of many well-chosen case studies offered by Bregman, he contrasts the social effects of strikes that took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s by bankers in Ireland and garbage men in New York City, respectively. In the latter case, the city ground to a halt within a few days of industrial action, while in Ireland, the economy continued to grow without any significant change as the country continued to function normally over several months during the strike. The lesson Bregman draws is that the social contribution of labour needs to be fundamentally reassessed to reflect its true value.

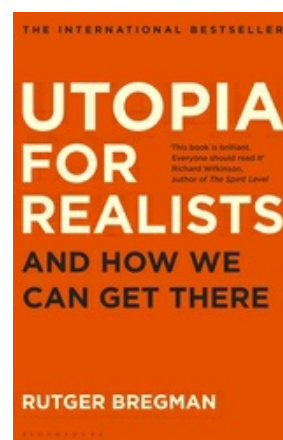




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Gross domestic product (GDP) is attacked by Bregman as an arbitrary set of statistics used by governments to measure what they choose. GDP, he argues, is detached from most peoples' lived experiences, and is completely unsuitable as a catch-all figure cited by governments to indicate social and economic progress or regression.

Despite these manifold flaws within modern capitalism, the liberal left, declares Bregman, has no competing vision. Modest welfare redistribution and a paltry commitment to foreign aid budgets are weak responses to the scale of the challenges we face. But the present generation of millennials appears resigned to being worse off than their parents, because, paralysed by orthodoxy and convention, 'we cannot come up with anything better'.

Bregman argues that progressives can build a better society by aiming high and adopting a radical spirit, taking inspiration from writings on utopias by Thomas More and Oscar Wilde in seeking 'alternative horizons to spark our imaginations'. Humanity's natural state is to constantly strive to better its circumstances; the only thing detaining us, according to Bregman, are the limitations we place on ourselves.

The author presents a number of proposals to bring about vital changes: [a universal basic income](#) and shorter working weeks with enhanced terms for employees, with both paid for by the higher taxation of capital (assets and machinery, instead of labour) to deal with the threats of automation and to tame a powerful rentier class.

The case for universal basic income is evidenced by its successful trials on a small scale, such as when [Dauphin, a small town near Winnipeg in Canada, guaranteed each of its 13,000 residents a basic income of \\$19,000](#). The experiment lasted four years; the statistics collected showed that the town made huge strides in social progress during its implementation: marriages were postponed, birth-rates dropped, educational attainment improved substantially, while hospitalisations decreased by around 9 per cent (the implications of this last finding are huge in developed nations where [healthcare spending is as high as 17 per cent of GDP](#)).

Additionally, Bregman argues that a shorter working week is needed to deal with the erosion of jobs caused by automation. The benefits include addressing stress-related illnesses from overwork, reducing energy consumption and increasing the amount of time people can spend with and care for their families. Such a change would also bring great advances in gender equality, as men would have more free time to contribute to their families, with enhanced parental leave described by Bregman as 'a Trojan horse with the potential to truly turn the tide for gender equality'.

Despite the author's enthusiasm for universal basic income, the case Bregman makes for the book's central proposal is not wholly convincing. A recurring criticism of universal basic income is that it fails to recognise the role of work in providing humans with dignity and purpose in their lives; although Bregman uses his examples to argue that people did not work significantly less when receiving a universal basic income. But the instances he cites, such as Dauphin and relating to homeless people in the City of London, are relatively small-scale and have only been tested over a short period of time.

Bregman would no doubt argue that these kinds of reservations are why this radical policy has never been given the chance to be tested on a national scale (the policy came tantalisingly close being implemented in the US by Richard Nixon in 1971 before it was killed off by ideologues within his administration, in another fascinating historical side note from Bregman). But with high-profile advocates such as former [US president Barack Obama](#), [Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg](#) and the [ascendant Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn](#), it seems likely that a true test of this bold idea will come soon.

*Utopia for Realists* ends with a template for progressives around the world to organise and rally. It is a suitable conclusion to an assured, ambitious and at times outrageous book that aims to solve the toughest and complex challenges that modern societies face. At its heart is a simple idea: to revive what we have lost in our race to embrace a competitive, free market economy; to look after each other and reject the failed consensus that has led us to the current dangerous and unhappy political and social impasse.

In Bregman's view, the only thing stopping us from achieving utopia is ourselves. He sets the bar high and challenges us all to clear it: it is only when we conquer ourselves that we will reach our full potential, a valuable and timely message in a book that deserves to be read widely.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*