

RUTGER BREGMAN

UTOPIA FOR REALISTS

Book Review: Utopia for Realists By Rutger Bregman

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Are we still able to think big, to imagine a better world than the one we currently live in? Rutger Bregman, a young Dutch historian, certainly thinks so. I have been following his activities for a while now, as he strongly believes in the concept of ‘a basic income for everyone’, and so do I. Although the idea is appealing, it is hard to establish firm arguments that cannot in any way be refuted by critics, and maybe even by realists. So when Bregman announced that he was about to publish a book, ‘Utopia for realists’, I knew it would be my next read. I was determined to arm myself with stronger arguments to discuss the topic with housemates, colleagues and friends.

Put on your utopic glasses, and get inspired...

Bregman takes off with a pledge for imagination, picturing utopia. With vivid anecdotes, he illustrates how men’s dream to fly and women’s desire to vote have become realities that can no longer be questioned. The author stresses the importance of imagined utopias as a propeller of our happiness and progress. He further points out that ‘the left’ arguably needs to think bigger, create a vision that is able to inspire not only the electorate, but also, more importantly, itself.

A spirit of utopian thinking, from a liberal-left perspective, sets the tone. In the following chapters, Bregman introduces, from a historical point of view, the concept of a general basic income. His evidence-based approach is powerful and the anecdotal but bold style walks you through his advocacy fluently. Bregman introduces two additional concepts; the 15-hour working week, and open borders for all. The former is introduced in relation to the abundance of purposeless jobs, defined as those that do not add value to society, for which a basic income arguably would be a good alternative as it would allow everyone to decide what to do with their lives. The latter is proposed as an ideal manner to make the basic income inclusive to developing countries, which would be given the freedom to move to ‘the land of plenty’.

While Bregman’s case for a basic income is convincing, his argument for a shorter workweek is clearly less established. Although the author very much takes home the point of ‘bullshit capitalism’, he proposes working less, and thus more leisure, as the single solution for these value-less jobs that have become the norm. Surely there is a possibility to re-focus society towards more value-creation as an alternative? More flexible systems without doubt are desirable, but I would not be jumping to live in Bregman’s 15-hour workweek utopia where Netflix and virtual reality might provide hours of occupation. I am sure a practised utopist can come up with more meaningful solutions.

Similarly, Bregman touches on the idea of open borders, but fails to develop in detail how developing countries would be included in his model. His concepts are proposed from a very Western-centric viewpoint, and he might as well have better left them in the West. I cannot get over the feeling that the open border concept is pulled into the story as a fast solution for inclusivity, unfortunately not a very convincing one. Again, some more dreaming might be in order to arrive at a more holistic formulation of the basic income 'for all (of humanity)'.

Overall, Bregman did meet my expectations as he considerably strengthened my insights into the perks of a basic income. While I was 'a believer' in the first place, I can see how his book can be enriching for every reader, whether they do or do not agree with the concepts advocated for. The extent to which Bregman has provided me with the more practical arguments I had hoped for, is less clear. Although he has equipped me with experimental evidence on the success of basic income as a right, the poorly supported case for inclusivity through open borders might harm rather than strengthen his advocacy as it highlights more problems than solutions. On the other hand, his concepts leave plenty of room for others to put on their utopic glasses and suggest ideas to improve upon both our valueless job market and Western-focused perspective.

Bregman's debut certainly sets the tone for progressive thinking, and does so in style. 'Utopia for realists' has been described as a brilliant, truly enlightening must-read, and I wholeheartedly agree with this praise. Bregman challenges us to explore new ideas, think boldly, and be receptive to new ways forward. Reason enough to indulge in his lively prose, and get inspired.

About the Author



Karen Stroobants is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie post-doctoral Fellow at the Centre for Protein Misfolding Diseases at the Chemistry Department. With a strong background in biophysical characterisation of proteins, she recently engaged in the study of membrane protein aggregates and their potential role in neurodegenerative diseases. Before moving to the UK, Karen received a prestigious PhD fellowship at KU Leuven, Belgium, where she worked on the development of a novel biotechnological methodology for protein hydrolysis under ambiguous conditions. Apart from being a researcher, Karen has always been engaged in promoting the communication between different academic players, industry, policy makers and society in general.