

BOOK REVIEW

Utopia or Bust: A Guide to the Present Crisis, by Benjamin Kunkel. New York: Verso, 2014. \$14.95 U.S., paper. ISBN: 978-1-78168-327-9. Pages: 1-180.

Reviewed by Caleb Wellum.¹

Benjamin Kunkel's *Utopia or Bust: A Guide to the Present Crisis* is a punchy primer on recent Marxist thought. It consists of six essays of varying lengths, each of which engages with the work of a contemporary intellectual on the left. Kunkel wrote the essays between 2010 and 2013 in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and previously published each in either the *London Review of Books*, *n + 1*, or the *New Statesmen*. The language and tone of these essays exudes a sense of urgency befitting the context of their composition. They are clearly and purposefully written, perhaps explaining Verso's decision to publish them as a short book in its Jacobin series, which is designed to engage the ideas and intellectual history of the Left for a popular audience.

Kunkel is well-suited to the task of popularization. He is a gifted writer and novelist who has become something of a Marxist public intellectual of late. His goal is to provide an entryway into Marxism for people who know "little about [it] beyond its reputation as debunked economics and totalitarian politics," but who are disenchanted with global capitalism after the recent financial crisis and want "to look into the matter for themselves" (Kunkel 19). Kunkel defines Marxism as a body of thought that analyzes capitalism as a system in order to transcend it. It asks important questions about the history of capitalism and class struggle, the relations between different classes and the state, and the ways in which culture reflects the economic conditions of its creation. The essays in *Utopia or Bust*, however, focus mainly on economics and culture, setting aside politics, ecology, gender, race, and religion. Kunkel acknowledges their limited, idiosyncratic scope and supplements them with a brief bibliographic essay.

Although Kunkel composed the essays in *Utopia or Bust* separately, there are a few threads that run through the book that comprise its argument. The first is that only contemporary Marxism offers a systematic and compelling analysis of capitalism, so people looking to understand the current financial crisis would do well to read Marxist analyses. Indeed, Kunkel is driven by the conviction that this is a propitious moment for Marxists to popularize their views to a disgruntled citizenry. The second thread is the idea that "the left," which Kunkel generally equates with Marxism, "needs to supplement its anti-capitalism with a basic conception of another order" (Kunkel, 16). It needs to reclaim and articulate a vision of utopia to drive a post-capitalist transition. In this, the book seems to be talking more to people already on board with a broadly Marxist perspective than to curious citizens looking for a way understand their world. Nevertheless, by introducing a broad readership to key ideas in Marxist analysis, interspersed with his own assessments and reflections, Kunkel hopes to "contribute something by way of intellectual orientation to the project of replacing...capitalism...with another, better order" (Kunkel, 2).

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The first four essays in *Utopia or Bust* introduce some of the main contours of contemporary Marxist thought through appreciations of leftist thinkers who Kunkel admires: geographer David Harvey, cultural theorist Fredric Jameson, historian Robert Brenner, and anthropologist David Graeber. The first essay explores “Marxian crisis theory” to redress what Kunkel sees as a lamentable gap in popular accounts of the financial crisis, despite media lip service to Marx “as a neglected seer of capitalist crisis” (Kunkel, 23-24). Although he discusses several thinkers, most of the essay unpacks David Harvey’s work, particularly his 2010 *The Enigma of Capital*, which Kunkel praises for correctly diagnosing the present financial crisis. The essay offers a succinct, Marxian definition of “crisis” and outlines Harvey’s spatial analysis of capitalist “overaccumulation.” The second essay moves from economics to consider Fredric Jameson and the practice of Marxist cultural analysis, defined as the effort to “recover the relationship between a given object...and the total historical situation underneath and all around it” (Kunkel, 55). This approach has certainly been influential in humanities departments over the past thirty years, but Kunkel spends most of the essay defending Jameson from accusations of irrelevance and obscurantism rather than applying his insights to the present crisis.

The third and fourth essays return to economics and history by way of Robert Brenner and David Graeber. The former uses Brenner’s *The Economics of Global Turbulence* to argue that the current financial crisis is best understood in the context of a long downturn that began in the 1970s, which Kunkel attributes to inadequate wages before briefly outlining principles for full employment in the future. The latter essay summarizes Graeber’s history of debt, noting how capitalism institutionalizes monetary debt, which it enforces by violence. The chapter ends with a call for the left to imagine “credit systems and monetary authorities” for a post-capitalist world free of inequality rooted in debt (Kunkel, 134). The final chapters of *Utopia or Bust* pivot from appreciation to critique with essays on the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek and art scholar Borys Groys. Kunkel praises Žižek’s analysis of ideology for showing why it is so difficult to imagine a world after capitalism, but criticizes his persistent vagueness about the shape of a possible post-capitalist system. The essay on Groys similarly questions the political utility of its subject’s work, concluding his work is “an occasion to remember” that a “revolution in culture” must accompany any wider political or economic revolution. Utopia must be both plausible and cultural if it is to have any chance of political success.

Kunkel writes clearly and succinctly about complex ideas, but this achievement can interfere with his goals. For instance, if *Utopia or Bust* is to introduce to Marxist analysis to frustrated citizens looking for a way to understand the financial crisis, it needs to offer better answers to common objections to Marxism. Kunkel often mentions the derision that Marxism has endured, particularly since the end of the Cold War, and its roots in the historical failures of Communist regimes in the Soviet Union, China, and elsewhere. Kunkel dismisses these charges rather abruptly, never offering even a hint of a convincing response. If Kunkel wants to convince a broad audience to integrate Marxist analysis into their political views, it would be helpful to propose concise answers to such objections. The same is true for the idea of utopia, which is similarly derided in mainstream discourse as dangerously impossible. Finally, because these are separate essays, the reader is forced to figure out how they bear as a whole on the present financial crisis. The introduction clearly introduces Kunkel’s purpose, but after reading these wide ranging essays, it would have been helpful to have a conclusion that suggests some points of cohesion.

These criticisms aside, *Utopia or Bust* is a lively and readable account of recent Marxist thought that deserves a wide audience. Kunkel covers a lot of ground in few pages with verve and clarity, often conjuring memorable phrases to characterize the ideas and impact of the thinkers that he profiles. Although the essays on Jameson and Žižek evade detailed discussion, most of the essays effectively outline the most important contributions of each scholar, showing how their ideas bear on the present. Neophytes wanting an accessible introduction to a Marxist perspective on the financial crisis, or to the contributions of the scholars that the book covers, will benefit from reading *Utopia or Bust*. Graduate students and experts will find a thought-provoking refresher, and a challenge to move from critique to building a better society. Although Kunkel may be hard-pressed to convert skeptics, his book raises important questions about vital issues that ought to preoccupy all engaged citizens.