

Ready to turn off the market road?

The groundwork may be set for a shift from selfish, individualistic capitalism, says Danny Dorling

Utopia for Realists and How We Can Get There
By Rutger Bregman
Bloomsbury, 336pp, £16.99
ISBN 9781408890264
Published 9 March 2017

U*topia for Realists* – an award-winning best-seller in the author’s native Netherlands – ends with Rutger Bregman professing admiration for the right-wing economists Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. Not necessarily admiration for many of their ideas, but for their dogged determination, and for the weeks of travel undertaken by some of those who attended the inaugural meeting of Hayek’s Mont Pèlerin Society, for whom reaching the small Swiss village that gave the group its name was no insignificant endeavour. There, in April 1947, they began to plan for small government and, as it turns out, gross economic inequality.

Bregman, a high-profile young Dutch historian and journalist, repeats Friedman’s story that when the 1973 oil crisis hit, it was only the quarter-century of planning in Mont Pèlerin that allowed his and Hayek’s ideas to become the new foundation of US and UK politics. Bregman complains that during the financial crisis of 2008, “there were no real alternatives to hand. No one had laid the groundwork.” But nine years after that crash, how can he know?

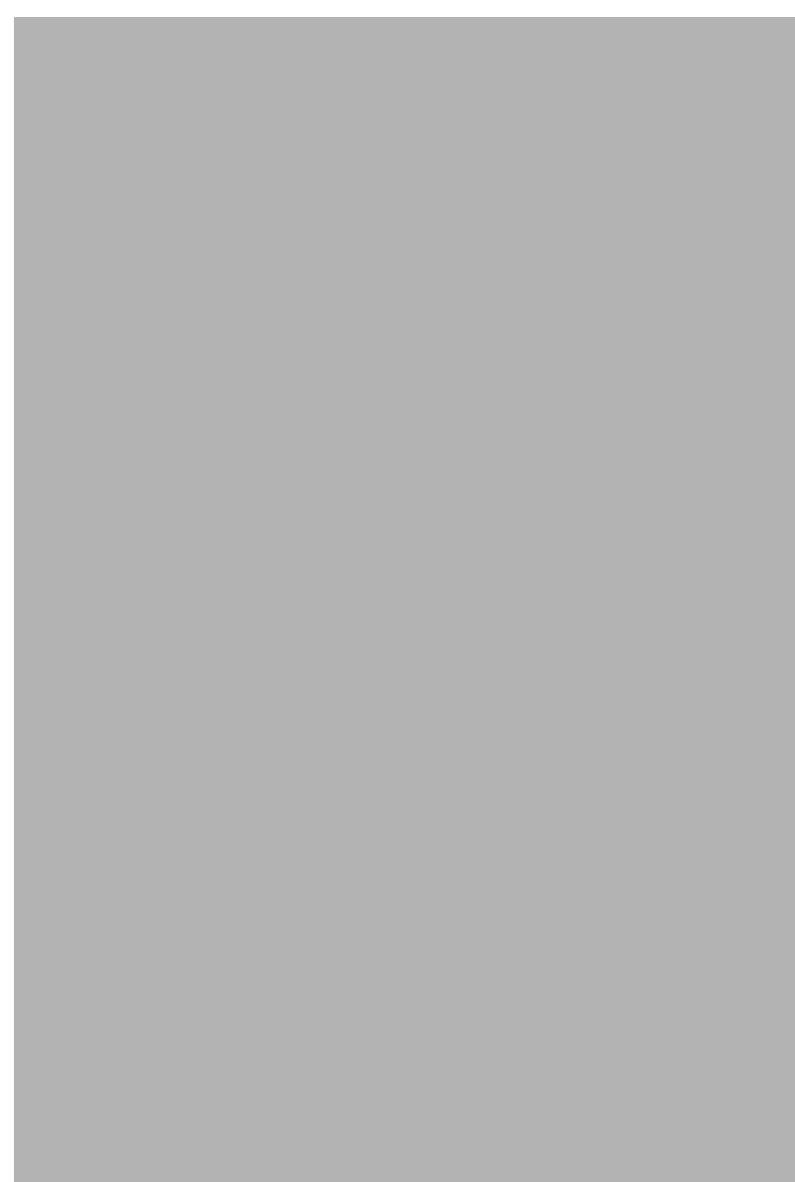
In 1982, nine years after 1973, it was far from obvious that the shift to the Right would last so long. Margaret Thatcher had labelled poverty a “personality defect”. Her government looked

weak as unemployment soared above 3 million. Ronald Reagan (who also pathologised the poor) presided over the US as unemployment exceeded 9 million that year: the worst toll since the Depression of the 1930s.

The Hayek-Friedman-Thatcher-Reagan version of individualist selfish Utopia looked to be failing, but for a time they achieved it, with the eventual toxic fallout of Brexit and Donald Trump’s electoral victory coming long after all of them had died. In 2017, nine years after the 2008 crash, it is still too early to tell how, in the future, we will write the history of now and who is actually winning the long-term arguments rather than the short-term elections.

Bankers make money, Bregman explains, without creating anything of value. This isn’t easy, he adds – otherwise many more people would do it – but just because it is difficult does not make it valuable. In saying this, he is joining what is now a great chorus of similar voices – a choir far too large to fit in Mont Pèlerin.

Financiers become convinced that they are producing something of great value because they are paid so much. Millions die early of cancer because the minds that might otherwise be focused on a cure are now “dreaming up hyper-complex financial products that are ultimately destructive”. Bregman advocates universal basic income and a short working week, and his arguments are accompanied by a flood of examples. However, all these can be listed only because so many others



Caption: xxxxxxx xxxxxx

have been making Bregman’s case over the past quarter-century, the time period in which it has become no longer necessary to travel to Switzerland to swap ideas, or to be part of a club.

Political parties can barely be told apart, Bregman observes, when “what now separates right from left is a percentage point or two on the income tax rate”. US president Richard Nixon came close to introducing the precursor to basic income and was deterred only by a follower of Ayn Rand. Free movement of people might make us \$6.5 trillion (£5.2 trillion) better off, a proposal that

would be well worth testing with one of the randomised, controlled trials that Bregman admires so much.

This is a book stuffed full of ideas, presented persuasively and pithily, but it is also just a part of the new zeitgeist – which is why it is one for today’s dreamers and tomorrow’s realists.

Danny Dorling is Halford Mackinder professor of geography, University of Oxford, and author of *A Better Politics: How Government Can Make Us Happier* (2016).