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Bryant William Sculos
bscul005@fiu.edu

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Utopia, A Must: A Review Essay on Benjamin Kunkel's Utopia or Bust

Abstract

Utopia or Bust, more than many foundational alternatives, forcefully though with non-sectarian wisdom, re-implants the notion of utopia to the front-of-the-line of Left theory (whether economic, geographic, political, social, and/or cultural). Kunkel's introductory survey reminds us through Harvey, among others, that "Utopia exists and that other systems, other spaces, are still possible."

Keywords

Utopia or Bust, Marxism, Critique of Capitalism

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(Source: Verso Books)

Utopia or Bust: A Guide to the Present Crisis (2014) by Benjamin Kunkel. Verso Books. \$14.95 Paperback. 160 pgs. ISBN: 9781781683279.

“No one knows what it means...But it’s provocative.”¹

Is late capitalism ruining your day? Are you tired of the constant unmeetable pressure to gain more secure employment with a living wage? (No? Well you’re probably a tenured faculty member at one of the few universities in the US that isn’t constantly cutting its budgets or a CEO awaiting their golden parachute). Are you tired of the rampant infiltration of free market, business-style sloganeering and the generalized privatization of public services under the banner of efficiency and progress? Well, this little pill might be right for you. At least that was the implicit premise of Benjamin Kunkel’s first major work, a novel and national best-seller entitled *Indecision* (2007). *Utopia or Bust A Guide to the Present Crisis*, though addressing similar concerns does so within a more academic, explicitly non-fiction framework. Its marketing slogan would be something like this: “Equally tired of late capitalism and trite, unimaginative socialist theory? Do you want to delve into the most innovative and creative analyses of capitalism and proposals for ridding our desperate society from the bounds of this repressive, exploitative social system, but can’t seem to get past the first chapter—or page—of any of the 600,000 books written by Slavoj Žižek in the past two months or of the equally erudite prose of Fredric Jameson? *Utopia or Bust* is must for you!”

Though this book is at once dense and thought-provoking, it is still introductory. As its subtitle indicated, it is indeed a guide to the present crisis and a guide to self-learning Marxism and critiques of capitalism more broadly. This text has the power to spark interest in the uninitiated. Polemical and expository, Kunkel’s collection of essays tracks the path of his own developing appreciation for the enduring importance and incompleteness of contemporary radical Leftist theory. With a compromising and entertaining human voice, Ben Kunkel explores and critiques

¹ Will Ferrell’s character’s commentary on the meaning of the Black Eyed Peas song “My Humps” in *Blades of Glory* (2007) cited in Kunkel (2014, pg. 167).

the major works of six of some of the most provocative and important Leftist thinkers of the past twenty-five years: David Harvey, Fredric Jameson, Robert Brenner, David Graeber, Slavoj Žižek, and Boris Groys. Most noteworthy though is that Kunkel does this in a very readable way. *Utopia or Bust* will be one of the most accessible and inspiring introductions to these thinkers you will probably ever come across. Shockingly, or perhaps not shockingly at all, Kunkel is not an academic at all but rather a novelist and autodidactic Marxist—or “Marxish” as he prefers to label himself.

This collection of essays begins with David Harvey, focusing on his theory of historical-geographical materialism. This chapter is the clearest and most comprehensive of the volume. Kunkel emphasizes what is central to Harvey’s enduring and expanding contribution to Marxism, namely this re-fusion of the concepts of space, time, and capital. The “spatio-temporal fix,” according to Harvey, is the “uneasy rapport between one kind of capital, highly mobile or liquid, and another kind—‘fixed capital embedded in the land’—defined by its very inertness” (39). Harvey is a thinker, Kunkel reminds his readers, who has always taken pains to connect his novel theoretical work to contemporary political and economic situations, most notably in recent years to the global recession in his *Enigma of Capital* (2011). Kunkel only offers a half-hearted critique of Harvey, chastising him for something he himself admits is problematic in just about the entirety of the Marxist tradition: lacking a concrete vision of the future. Kunkel concludes the chapter saying, “At the moment Marxism seems better prepared to interpret the world than to change it” (49-50).

The next essay covers the oeuvre of Fredric Jameson. Kunkel successfully characterizes Jameson as an essayist and not a writer of extensive tomes, even though many of Jameson’s essays end up collected in expansive bound texts. It is this experimental, classical Critical-Theoretical approach which is vital to appreciating Jameson’s unique American Marxism. Though the most prominent Marxist of the second half of the twentieth century, in an ironic twist of fate, Jameson also became a central figure in the tradition he sought to dismember, postmodernism. Rightly or wrongly, Kunkel attempts to characterize this reversal as a fitting Jamesonian dialectical negation, a thing becoming its opposite. Beyond this, as the principal theorist of the cultural aspects of late capitalism, Jameson’s work has emphasized the “lost” notion of utopia. That is, why we cannot theorize post-capitalism. Jameson’s argument, Kunkel explains, is that we are so deeply entrenched in a version of capitalism that has almost completely eroded the capacity to even imagine alternatives to it, never mind to coherently explain them. This notion of utopia is what guides Kunkel’s approach to the radical Left tradition, and is one he hopes to exceed. He doesn’t succeed at that task in this volume though.

The chapter on the Marxist historian Robert Brenner is the weakest of them all. Throughout the volume, Kunkel avoids excessive footnotes or citations, and he largely replaces them with verbal pointers, mostly with a high degree of clarity. This chapter is the exception, especially the first and last quarters of it. It is often very difficult to tell which facts or claims come from Kunkel’s head and which come from Brenner himself. Though I ended up learning a great deal about particular economic debates in this chapter—mostly regarding the relationship between full employment and wages—I was wondering the entire time how Brenner was offering anything but a liberal, center-left Keynesian-esque argument. It was not until the last couple of pages of the chapter that Kunkel shows how Brenner’s argument is relevant to the question of the viability

of capitalism and radical structural change. Still, I could not tell if this was Kunkel's extrapolation or part of Brenner's scholarship. Overall this chapter lacked a clear connection to concept of utopia, though it certainly nailed the "bust" aspect on the head. This chapter combined with the next essay on David Graeber, the controversial anarchist anthropologist and intellectual voice of Occupy Wall Street (though his participation was certainly less hierarchical than this label suggests) points toward one of the great strengths of Kunkel's work, namely the ability to cover both the more traditional economic critiques of capitalism as well as the cultural critiques, what Jameson refers to as the dialectical inversion of base and superstructure; culture becomes material and economics becomes cultural (61). Graeber's expansive historical anthropological work on debt and his participation in Occupy Wall Street was intriguing and greatly contributed to the praxeological tone of this book, emphasizing the valuable intersection of theory and practice in the search for practicable solutions to the oppression and exploitation of capitalism.

The chapter on Žižek takes praxis as its perspective of critique. Kunkel clearly values the contribution of Žižek, but is also rightfully deeply suspect of his passive solution. Žižek's dialectical importance is in specifying why we cannot think beyond capitalism. Kunkel summarizes Žižek's recent work while avoiding any of the million references Žižek makes to notoriously difficult thinkers and traditions. Kunkel doesn't really even discuss Lacan very much. It isn't necessary for the summary and critique of Žižek he provides. Kunkel highlights the importance of Žižek in that he, more than anyone, has attempted to rescue an orientation towards the post-capitalist, through the resuscitation of what serves as a utopian vision and empty signifier: "communism" (143). This chapter also finally offers an actual definition of capitalism! In my own work, I have found far too many Marxists and critics of capitalism running roughshod over the difficult work of conceptualizing, even broadly, what makes capitalism, capitalism. Capitalism is not like pornography, quite the opposite actually. We might not know it when we see it, but we can (at least attempt to contingently) define it. Kunkel quotes Žižek directly on this: "Markets long predate capitalism. Capitalism is better understood as designating a society that subordinates all processes...to the private accumulation of capital" (141). "A ruthless criticism of capitalism, it turned out, could still be contemplated...but only on the condition that it appear as the work of a jester or provocateur" (138). Žižek is that ruthless critic and jester, and this complex dialectical existence represents both the importance and limitedness of Žižek as a Marxist.

Kunkel's chapter on the socialist aesthetics of Boris Groys is a thoughtful, Adornoian-inspired critique of what Kunkel considers Groys's idealist philo-communism rooted in an over-valorization of the popular and even propagandistic. This chapter is the one where Kunkel's complicated, critical adoration of Theodor Adorno is most prominent and explicitly stated, though Adorno's ghost permeates much of the book. Kunkel takes Groys to task for not only offering weakly supported historical claims about the radical importance of art under Stalinism, but also more generally for being more provocative than convincing, undermining the moments of deeply dialectical and potentially important trains of thought. The idea of a utopia aesthetics could not be more important, but for Kunkel, Adorno is still a much better representative of that promise than Groys has ever been. With that said, we should not dismiss Groys; he has made numerous interesting attempts to theorize more specifically what post-capitalist or truly

communist art beyond the twentieth century should look like, something Adorno never felt comfortable doing.

The book ends fittingly with a “Guide to Further Reading” which is at once valuable and comprehensive in pointing to the most important historical and contemporary radical Left (mostly Marxist) texts necessary for any aspiring socialist.

What I often try to do with my reviews is to look at the initial reactions of people across the Internet, blogosphere, and other publications to the book or film under consideration. There was much praise and hate for Kunkel’s book. Much of it aimlessly hating on the idea of utopia, the book’s introductory quality, as well as the choice of thinkers. The first two criticisms are largely shallow and unthoughtful readings of the book, but the one that I think is accurate and at the same time misleading is the lack of female or non-white voices. It is true, because, well all the guys mentioned in the book are, well, guys and white. However, is it Kunkel’s fault that in his attempt to summarize and make accessible the most popular academic Leftists, that there are often not a lot of non-white or non-male voices included in that group? Certainly not entirely. From my perspective, the strongest non-white, non-male thinker that would fit in would be Angela Davis. If being white is okay, Nancy Fraser might work as well or the late duo J-K Gibson-Graham. However, Davis is not nearly as popular or relevant as she was in her heyday in the 70s and 80s (even if her theories are still prescient), and Nancy Fraser has underemphasized her socialist leanings in her most recent works. J-K Gibson-Graham’s inclusion though would have offered a better glimpse of the kind of post-capitalist theorizing being done beyond the Marxist tradition, and represented a much needed (though white) non-straight, non-male voice. Now, without implying that political economic and social, cultural and political theory is not gendered or racialized—it surely is, deeply both—Kunkel admits the somewhat arbitrary nature of his choices (they were people he had written about in previous book reviews, mostly for the *London Review of Books*). Perhaps that approach is too status-quo normative to be palatable, but Kunkel openly acknowledges these short-comings in his introduction. The point of criticism should not be that certain identities are not represented, but rather that certain important arguments that relate to identity are not included. The identity that matters above all else is class, and all of the six thinkers Kunkel includes cover it, though not as much as you might think for a book of radical Leftists.

The criticism of omission should be leveled at Marxists more generally though: we need to listen to new voices. Actively seek them out if we have to, but white, straight male Marxism is not good enough anymore, if it ever was. Utopia—in the imaginative, materially-realistic sense—must be identity-inclusive and understand the intersectionality of exploitations and oppressions oriented around identities like class, race, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, national origin, etc., without ever being reduced to identity politics. Class is at the root of it all, but the nature of late capitalism means that we cannot ignore intersectional oppressions. The best contemporary radical Left theories address this, but they are rare and only hinted at here. *Utopia or Bust* is still an invaluable contribution to radical Left movements though for what it does well, providing a lucid introduction to some very difficult, popular Leftists. While the book is certainly incomplete and problematic on that same register, it is also not better used as toilet paper or kindling because of the weaknesses.

There are of course simplifications and over-simplifications throughout Kunkel's book, but overall I am in love with it and everything it represents for Leftist writing: it is sophisticated and stylish, captivating and stimulating, and sobering while still being inspiring. The major thing this book could have used more of was Kunkel's own thoughts on the promise of the title: he never tells us explicitly why we are in a utopia or bust scenario. Though the introduction hints at an answer and much of his commentary on the authors discussed covers it, after hearing all of this exposition, I wanted more Kunkel. To be fair he promises a second book to tackle the question and answer further. While I certainly would have appreciated a final wrap-up chapter with more of Kunkel's own thoughts on the topics he summarizes from the theorists he covers, in his coverage of those thinkers the argument for utopia is clear enough to avoid leaving the reader unsatisfied. It is principally through his critiques of Žižek and Groys that this message is made clearest. Utopia is difficult—perhaps impossible, but it is absolutely necessary. This sentiment is the negative dialectical spirit undergirding Kunkel's entire book, and hopefully what he will confront head on in the promised sequel, which will attempt to imagine post-capitalist futures, that is, utopia more concretely and specifically.

Next time a friend or young student asks you what they should read to get a good introduction to radical Left theory, while there is always value in pointing them to foundational, primary texts like the *Communist Manifesto* or *The German Ideology*, or the *Grundrisse* or *What is Property?* or *What is to be Done?* or *Revolution Betrayed*, I think *Utopia or Bust* might be a more productive recommendation. Not because it is equivalent or comparable in importance or originality to these primary texts, but rather because it can spur interest in delving deeper into these traditions through accessible, entertaining writing and motivating critique. This text, more than these foundational alternatives, forcefully though with non-sectarian wisdom, re-implants the notion of utopia to the front-of-the-line of Left theory (whether economic, geographic, political, social, and/or cultural). Kunkel reminds us through Harvey, "Utopia exists and that other systems, other spaces, are still possible" (55).

For more seasoned scholars, beyond offering an introduction to thinkers you may have thus far avoided, Kunkel's *Utopia or Bust* should remind us to ask ourselves, in our own work, whether activist, artistic, academic or any combination: where is the utopian ethos? It is not enough to "name the system" anymore, we must shame the system and name alternatives and all in service of the idea that "In any genuine renaissance of Marxist thought and culture, it will probably be decisive that capitalism has forfeited the allegiance of many people who are today under thirty" (19).