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Author biography

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Peter Hudis

Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014; vi+241 pp.: ISBN 9781608462759, \$28

Ruth Levitas

Utopia as Method: the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; xviii+268 pp.; 9780230231979 p/b, £22

Reviewed by Hugo Radice, University of Leeds, UK

For Marxists, the relation between socialism and utopia has almost always started and finished with the apparent dismissal of 'utopian socialism' in *The Communist Manifesto*. Yet the purpose of Marx and Engels was surely not to dismiss all discussion of an alternative social order, but to argue that such discussion needs to be based on a thorough and convincing analysis of capitalism. Thus, in his *Utopianism and Marxism* (1987), Vincent Geoghegan begins by emphasising Marx and Engels' respect for the utopian socialists and the clear parallels with their own thinking on what might replace capitalism; he offers a wide-ranging, concise and readable historical account of the continuing engagement between utopianism and Marxism from the Second International onwards, including the contributions of Morris, Bloch, Marcuse, Bahro and Gorz. The books under review offer us a renewal of this discussion, each taking a different and distinctive approach.

Peter Hudis argues that within Marx's own writings, we can legitimately discern the outlines of a socialist alternative, consistently linked to the critique of political economy that formed the core of his work. *Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism* is therefore organised as a systematic and focused journey through that work in chronological order. Before the journey begins, the reader is presented with a long introduction which mostly (pp. 9–36) reviews recent 'philosophical literature' (his term), carefully distinguishing his own approach from both 'objectivist' analyses centred on the *logic* of capital (in which he includes inter alia Sekine, Albritton, Backhaus, Postone and Arthur) and

'subjectivist' analyses centred on the *history* of capital (e.g. Negri and Holloway). Hudis himself clearly inclines towards an approach that recognises the need to combine the two, referring notably to Dunayevskaya, Tony Smith and Ollman. This is, however, a difficult chapter for anyone unfamiliar with these debates, and the reader may prefer to skip pages 9–36 and return to them later.

The four substantive chapters deal, in turn, with Marx's early writings (ch. 1), the drafts of *Capital* and the *Grundrisse* (ch. 2), *Capital I* to *III* (ch. 3) and finally his late writings, especially on the Paris Commune and the Gotha Programme (ch. 4). Hudis evidently rejects the idea of an 'epistemological break' between the younger and the older Marx. Each chapter maps new elements which are added to the projected alternative, drawn from Marx's evolving theoretical understanding of capitalism, and on its empirical testing against the historical upheavals of the mid-19th century. The arguments of these chapters are a model of careful construction and exposition, with detailed reference to Marx's own texts; happily, at least as regards readability, references to alternative understandings are very largely confined to footnotes. A short conclusion summarises the full account and powerfully makes the case that the multiple crises of present-day capitalism demand an explicitly transcendent approach, one that binds together critique and alternative.

Ruth Levitas is a sociologist who has become a leading contributor to the development of utopian studies as an academic field, notably with *The Concept of Utopia* (Levitas 1990), as well as a powerful critic of contemporary capitalism, as in *The Inclusive Society? Social Exclusion and New Labour* (Levitas 1998). The basic intention in *Utopia as Method* is presented in a very direct way in its subtitle: the 'imaginary reconstitution of society' requires a radical end to the imprisonment of sociology as a discipline within the confines of our existing social order and its manifold problems. In a brief introduction, Levitas sets out her purpose and explains the different approaches that have been taken to the idea of utopia: as the desire for better ways of living, as fantasy or nightmare, as practical experimentation and as a comprehensive sociological model.

The chapters that follow are divided into three parts. In Part I, the first chapter reprises her earlier book by contrasting Bloch's advocacy of the importance of hope for humankind, with the fear of John Gray and others that the pursuit of perfection is more likely to lead to tyranny. Chapters 2 and 3 then identify and explore the utopian impulse implicit in art and music. Part II robustly critiques the academic field of sociology for its dogged rejection of that impulse in favour of the pursuit of an imagined status as a 'science'. Originally, there were few boundaries between sociology and utopian thinking (ch. 4); then sociology became institutionalised, professionalised and at worst hermetically sealed off from a utopian impulse condemned as 'idle speculation' (ch. 5); but happily, more recently the borders have reopened and diverse new approaches have emerged that creatively blend the two together once more (chs 6 and 7).

On these foundations, Part III directly and systematically addresses the relation between the utopian 'imagination' and the 'analytics' of the social sciences. These chapters advocate utopia as a method of exploring the connections between the past ('archaeology'), present ('ontology') and future ('architecture'). But equally importantly, Levitas develops her idea of an 'imaginary reconstitution of society' in terms of key debates about our current economic, social and political order with which we are all familiar. Chapter 8 looks, in turn, at debates over meritocracy, 'civil' society and economic growth,

relating them to conceptions of the good society rooted in our imagined past. Chapter 9 is an extended reflection on how we can root our understanding of the present also in ideas of the good, drawing notably on the work of Sayer and Unger, but harking back also to Morris and Bloch. The key point is that 'the utopian method necessarily involves claims about who we are and who we might and should be' (p. 196). Chapter 10 then shows how practical ideas for constructing the future arise repeatedly, of necessity, from the identification of key social problems such as meaningless work, inadequate care, grotesque inequality and the decay of democracy.

This book can be a difficult read, since very few of us are familiar with the full range of literature on which Levitas draws, but ultimately it is very rewarding. She presents the views of the many cited authors with clarity and treats them with respect. The reader should return that respect by persisting when the going gets tough, for the real achievement of *Utopia as Method* is that it develops a convincing and comprehensive justification for all who are trying to build a society based on equality and social justice for all.

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Author biography

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Peter Latham

Who Stole the Town Hall? The End of Local Government as We Know It, Bristol: Policy Press, 2017; 176 pp.: ISBN 9781447437270, £12.99

Reviewed by Edward Yates, *University of Leicester, UK*

In *Who Stole the Town Hall?*, Peter Latham presents a critical overview of changes which have occurred at the level of local government in the United Kingdom since the New Labour government introduced the Local Government Act in 2000. This legislation along with the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and the Conservative's 2011 Localism Act are seen by Latham as being aspects of the continuing neoliberalisation of local government, which has led to the growth in power of the executive branch of local government at the expense of the legislative branch.

The book contains five chapters, each covering a major theme. Chapter 1 provides an overview of neoliberalisation as a process and examines how the private sector has influenced local government by promoting the executive system of local government over the committee system through the 'secondment of experts' to Whitehall who advocate for the privatisation and marketisation of council services (pp. 23–24). The executive system of local government is advocated by these private sector figures as it centralises power in fewer hands, making it easier for the private sector to influence decisions (pp. 8–9).