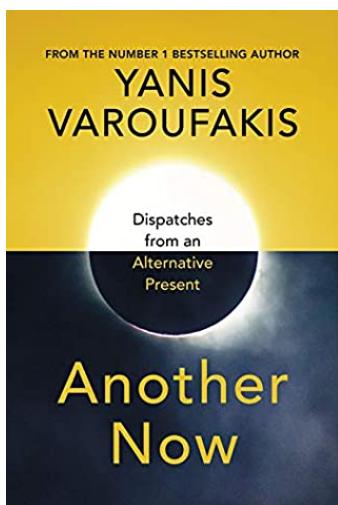


Book Review



Yanis Varoufakis, *Another Now: Dispatches from an Alternative Present* (Kindle edition), Random House, 2020; 240pp.: ISBN: 9781847925633

Sarah Kimmel✉

Integrative Center for Humanities Innovation, Chiang Mai University

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Abstract

In this review I evaluate Yanis Varoufakis' *Another Now: Dispatches from an Alternative Present*, as an example of a “concrete utopian” novel, following a definition that originates with Ernst Bloch. I discuss the extent to which *Another Now* does or does not fit that criteria, as well as the specific actions and proposals it sets forth and its contributions to post-capitalist theory.

Keywords: utopian fiction, concrete utopia, post-capitalism

Utopian fiction is often dismissed as escapist, the desperate offspring of the dilemma of capitalist realism. Unable to imagine the end of capitalism, its authors imagine the end of the world as we know it and construct a fantasy replacement. This fantasy offers so few points of connection with our current reality, so few pathways from the real to the imagined, that it simply reinforces our resignation to the status quo—our sense that it would take some kind of miracle, or apocalypse, to disrupt it. If utopian visions no longer have any relevance, Fredric Jameson has said, it might be because of “that extraordinary historical dissociation into two distinct worlds which characterizes globalization today” (2004, par. 1). In one world, the disintegration of the social has been so “absolute” that utopian social schemes seem “as frivolous as they are irrelevant”; in the other, technological change has been so swift that fantasizing seems “boring and antiquated” (par.1).

It is at this point that the distinction between concrete and abstract utopias might still prove useful. As Ruth Levitas reminds us, interpreting Ernst Bloch, abstract utopias are “compensatory” while concrete utopias are “anticipatory”; the latter express hope and educated

✉ sarah.k@cmu.ac.th

desire while the former merely desire (1990, p. 15). Unlike abstract utopia, concrete utopia “reaches forward to a real possible future, and involves not merely wishful but will-full thinking...simultaneously anticipating and effecting the future” (1990, p. 15). Bloch’s definition of concrete utopia also relies on the contrast between an ontology of being and one of becoming; he reminds us that “the material world is essentially unfinished and in a state of process—a process whose direction and outcome are not predetermined” (1990, p. 17). Although Bloch provides no specific criteria for distinguishing between concrete and abstract utopias, or for assessing the ethical and political ramifications of their various proposals, at the very least his concrete utopia is rooted in and responsive to the historical-material present (1990, p. 24).¹

In his utopian novel *Another Now*, Yanis Varoufakis—real-life founder of the Progressive International, Diem25, and MeRA25—is careful to place himself in the concrete utopia category. The novel’s basic plot is that of many classic works of utopian fiction: the traveler from another time who discovers a better land or universe that has developed in isolation from our own. But the novel resolutely avoids any nostalgic yearnings after a simpler time. Its frame narrative opens in 2036 and the adventures that befall its three main characters take place in 2025. The third of these characters is a young engineer named Costa. Disillusioned by the corruption of the various companies for which he designs, he creates a machine meant to retrain human desire away from its addiction to greed, a motivation which might be recognizable to those familiar with Slovaj Žižek’s or Todd McGowan’s work on capitalist desire. Instead—or additionally—the “Freedom Machine” opens up a worm hole into an alternative universe that unfolds simultaneously with his own in another dimension, complete with another version of himself and his friends. According to Costa’s alter-ego Kosti, with whom Costa holds extended dialogues, this “Other Now” diverged from ours after the stock market crash of 2008.

Connecting the genesis of this Other Now to a real-world event is another way that Varoufakis highlights its concrete potential. He emphasizes the point that many political commentators made in the wake of the 2008 crash, that it was one of those forks in the road that, as Naomi Klein has written, could have radically altered our global future for the better if we had possessed “a government that was unafraid of bold long-term economic planning, as well as social movements that were able to move masses of people to demand the realization of that kind of vision” (2014, p. 164). The primary features of this alternative trajectory, dubbed “corpo-syndicalism” in one of the chapter titles, are egalitarian workplaces in which everyone owns one and only one share of the company and none of these shares are tradeable or transferable, thereby eliminating the stock market and financial sectors and largely reducing the need for banks. Each worker/owner also has a vote in the company’s decisions; “one person, one share, one vote” is the catchphrase that Varoufakis emphasizes in the book (2020, p. 65). The “momentous” result of this policy is the “reintegration” of the political and economic spheres in the Other Now, the disintegration of the difference between democratic façade and corporate oligarchic underbelly that has undermined Western liberal democracy since its inception (2020, p. 70).

Another feature of the Other Now is automatic bank accounts in the Central Bank for everyone, which are divided into three parts. One collects each worker’s earnings, another holds a trust fund granted to each baby on birth and dispensed as business capital when he or she matures, and the third provides a monthly guaranteed income, calibrated to individuals’ ages. This income guarantees “freedom from need as the baby grows into a child, a young adult, and a citizen” and is funded by corporate taxes, one of the only two taxes that exist in the Other

¹ Paul Blackledge (2019) also offers a more recent discussion of concrete utopianism indebted to Marx and Bloch. Analytical Marxists like Erik Olin Wright also cast their solutions as “real utopias,” by which they mean “a clear elaboration of workable institutional principles that could inform emancipatory alternatives to the existing world. This elaboration “falls between a discussion simply of the moral values that motivate the enterprise and the fine- grained details of institutional characteristics” (Wright 2010, p. ii).

Now, which in effect simply recycles society's capital back into society's pockets (pp. 75, 77). Land is publicly owned, rented out for commercial purposes, and its revenues used to create social services, while transactions over land are enabled by an "automated, fully-fledged market mechanism" accessible to all as well as a randomly selected oversight committee (pp. 186-187). International trade is also regulated by a transparent system that mitigates imbalances, channeling surpluses in the North to impoverished areas in the South (pp. 172-181). Similarly, the Central Bank protects against inequities by using a public payment system whose automated transactions are "coordinated by an ingenious algorithm" that allows the system's overall workings and money flows to remain transparent to all while also ensuring individual privacy (p. 167). This bank runs on a "decentralized digital architecture" and is supervised not by the government but by "a citizens' monetary assembly, comprising a rotating panel, chosen by lot, using an algorithm that ensured fair representation of all members of society" (pp. 168, 171). Everything in the Other Now is carefully constructed to avoid the subterfuges and concentrations of power, whether in state or private hands, that all the characters in the book agree are the enemy of humanity and solidarity.

But despite the specificity of these proposals and their sensitivity to real-world issues and concerns, reading Varoufakis' "thought experiment" (which is how his characters describe their ideas) can engender some of the same feelings of implausibility that plague readers of abstract utopia. Many post-capitalist scenarios are floating around in academic circles—Michael Albert's participatory economics springs most substantively to mind—but attempting to parse out their respective merits can seem like arguing over the shapes of clouds, moot in a time in which mainstream Keynesian economists are struggling to gain popular and political support for simple reforms like wealth taxes and minimum wage hikes.² Perhaps Varoufakis is missing—or making!—the point that the impediment to change is not lack of proposals, most of which simply need to be tried, but lack of education and political will. As Noam Chomsky (interviewed by Matsiori, 2020) has recently reiterated, "knowledge is not enough. Someone has to act on it." Perhaps, therefore, the most useful response to Another Now is to focus on specific elements of Varoufakis' experiment that suggest new avenues for action and resistance.

From this angle, then, one of the most provocative aspects of Varoufakis' scheme is its indictment of the world of financial capital and description of that capital's downfall in the Other Now. As Varoufakis has pointed out elsewhere, to a certain extent we are already living in a post-capitalist world, one in which feudalistic corporations are enriching themselves through trading and investments much more than through competition and profits from their enterprises (2021). In response to this, a movement called Ossify Wall Street, the alter-ego of Occupy Wall Street, develops in the Other Now and globalizes into a movement called Ossify Capitalism. A crucial difference between this movement and Occupy Wall Street is that the former recognizes "the futility of occupying spaces—squares, streets or buildings (2020, p. 99). "Capitalism does not live in space but in time and in the ebb and flow of financial transactions,"" one of Ossify Capitalism's leaders points out (2020, p. 99). Kosti and this leader tell Costa about "techno-rebels" who organize varieties of cyber strikes against financial capitalist institutions, eventually bringing them to their knees. "Crowdshorters," for example, create software that picks apart the individual debts bundled into CDOs, contacts the debt holders and convinces them to participate in "low-cost, targeted, short-term payment strikes," coordinated over a space of a few months (pp. 101-3). These strikes convince the federal government to stop bailing out financial institutions, to instead "step into the void and provide citizens with bank accounts"

² I am thinking here of the recommendations of popular center-left economists like Paul Krugman, Joseph Stiglitz, and Thomas Piketty. In a 2015 panel hosted by MSNBC and 92Y Plus, all three were asked about their solutions to the problem of inequality and the barriers to implementing those solutions. Even allowing for the fact that they were speaking to a popular audience, the answers to both were surprisingly simple.

(p. 104). “Solsourcers” organize mass withholdings from the pension funds of corporations, “Bladerunners” target big tech, and “Environs” force governments to rein in fossil fuel companies (p. 108). An international group called the “Flying Pickets” set themselves “the noble task of stopping multinationals from shifting exploitative practices from countries where the OC movement was flourishing to countries and jurisdictions where it was weaker” (p. 110). And Wiki blowers activate a computer virus that reveals encrypted and concealed information (pp. 110-111). As compelling as this idea is, an obvious impediment to organizing strikes that rely on “techno-rebels” is that engineers and their ilk seem more entrenched within the pockets of capital than the traditional proletariat. All three of the novel’s protagonists, Costa and his friends Eve and Iris (and their alter-egos in the Other Now), are educated intellectuals and professionals whose inherited wealth or guilt-ridden market investments give them the option of opting out and opposing capitalism on purely ideological grounds. However, it is hard to imagine a world in which those three conditions—educated, independently wealthy, yet somehow still disillusioned—coalesce in a number of people sufficient to sustain a successful techno-rebellion. On the other hand, some combination of these factors, or at least of the educated and disillusioned parts, may offer more hope for organization than a working class that is currently diverted and fractured by identity politics as well as soothingly sustained, at the clever behest of the powers that be, just above the level of absolute poverty. After all, many recent dissident movements around the world have been led by students: young, disaffected, newly “woke” members of the bourgeoisie who occupy one of the few communal spaces still open in the modern world and whose only drawback has been their incomplete connection of their politics to their economics.

Iris herself is a Marxist feminist who remains steadfastly opposed to the Other Now because it retains free markets, “markets without capitalism,” to which she is categorically opposed—although this feature of Varoufakis’ utopia is a helpful reminder that markets pre-date capitalism and are not necessarily implicated in it (Varoufakis 2020, p. 152). Iris is also disconcerted to discover that the Other Now has not destroyed patriarchy or birthed free love (p. 152). Iris’s alter-ego Siris reports that “mountains move, banking becomes extinct, even capitalism dies, but patriarchy lives on like a hard-to-kill cockroach” (p. 210). Unfortunately, shared prosperity, in true 1950s style, has brought about “a renewed social conservatism” in the Other Now (p. 222).

Varoufakis’ acknowledgment of the separate and enduring problem of patriarchy is gratifying but also alarming given his willingness to leave it unsolved. By juxtaposing his scheme with Iris and Siris’ radicalism, Varoufakis is able to acknowledge its limits while also pitch it as a more conservative option than the Marxism that most global audiences still unfortunately conflate with Stalinism. Yet Iris and Siris remain the moral linchpins of the book: when Eve decides to take her chances in the Other Now and crosses over through the wormhole before it closes off forever, Siris returns to our world to fight against its injustices. Iris, meanwhile, records all encounters between the two worlds into a diary that the novel’s frame narrator, a stand-in for Varoufakis named Yango Varo, turns into a book after her death. This use of embedded narratives, multiple voices and perspectives—the constant destabilizing of one character’s opinion by another’s—emphasizes the importance of process and participation and, ultimately, of empowering readers to remember that collective action in the service of collective goods is the key to social and political transformation. At the very least, Another Now can remind lay persons, politicians, and scholars alike that not everyone is resigned to the dilemmas of capitalist realism.

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