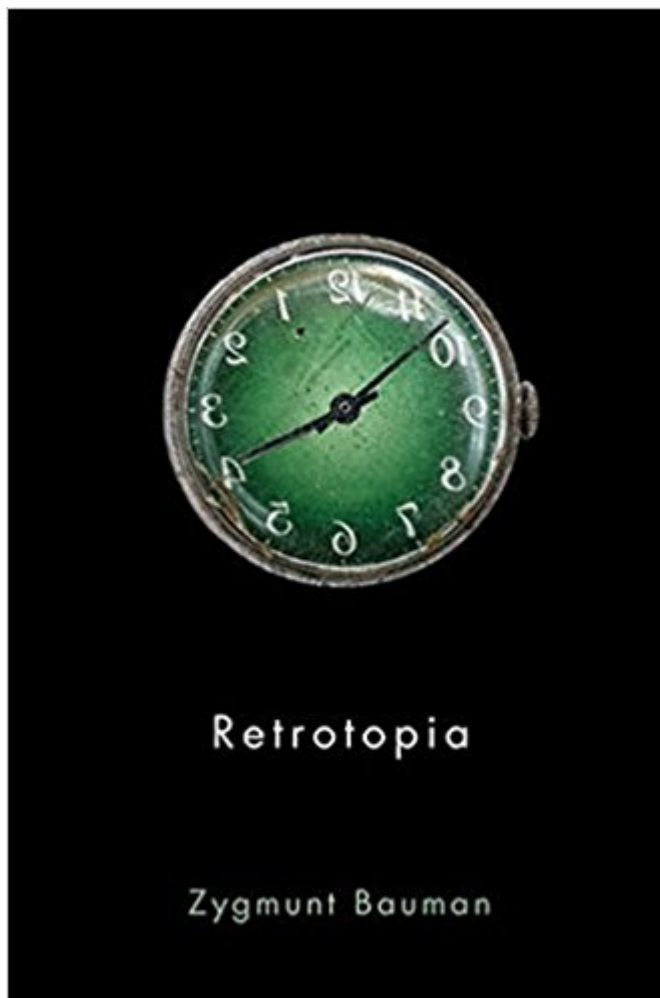




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Retrotopia



Synopsis

We have long since lost our faith in the idea that human beings could achieve human happiness in some future ideal state – a state that Thomas More, writing five centuries ago, tied to a topos, a fixed place, a land, an island, a sovereign state under a wise and benevolent ruler. But while we have lost our faith in utopias of all hues, the human aspiration that made this vision so compelling has not died. Instead it is re-emerging today as a vision focused not on the future but on the past, not on a future-to-be-created but on an abandoned and undead past that we could call retrotopia. The emergence of retrotopia is interwoven with the deepening gulf between power and politics that is a defining feature of our contemporary liquid-modern world – the gulf between the ability to get things done and the capability of deciding what things need to be done, a capability once vested with the territorially sovereign state. This deepening gulf has rendered nation-states unable to deliver on their promises, giving rise to a widespread disenchantment with the idea that the future will improve the human condition and a mistrust in the ability of nation-states to make this happen. True to the utopian spirit, retrotopia derives its stimulus from the urge to rectify the failings of the present human condition – though now by resurrecting the failed and forgotten potentials of the past. Imagined aspects of the past, genuine or putative, serve as the main landmarks today in drawing the road-map to a better world. Having lost all faith in the idea of building an alternative society of the future, many turn instead to the grand ideas of the past, buried but not yet dead. Such is retrotopia, the contours of which are examined by Zygmunt Bauman in this sharp dissection of our contemporary romance with the past.

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Customer Reviews

Zygmunt Bauman (1925-2017) was Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of Leeds.

“Retropia” by Zygmunt Bauman is the final book by the late, great sociologist whose passing in 2017 at age 91 represented a huge loss for humanity. Professor Bauman was a brave survivor of fascism, communism and capitalism who worked tirelessly for the future that humanity deserves. This masterpiece demonstrates that Professor Bauman’s thinking remained on point, ingenious and timely - up to the very end of his life. Professor Bauman draws on the great thinkers of the past including Thomas More, Thomas Hobbes and Philippe van Parijs to ponder the idea of human progress over the centuries. However, Professor Bauman contends that today, growing inequality has disillusioned ordinary people. Instead of imagining an utopian future, people have retreated into the narcissism of their private lives; where an imagined past “Retropia” fills the void of a lost community. Of course, Professor Bauman understands that demagogues have emerged to prey on the insecurities of the many. The value of Professor Bauman’s writing pertains to how he deconstructs the uneven social relations that drives class conflict in our time. Through his astute analysis, we realize that utopia can be ours if we want it; once we have the courage to accept everyone in the human family on equal terms. It’s a compelling, sincere and powerful closing to a book and a life that is eminently worthy of the reader’s thought, reflection and action. I highly recommend this outstanding book to everyone.

I understand a couple of the bad reviews for this book - but honestly, it’s published by "Polity," and even from the start, one should be able to tell that this is heavy-duty philosophical research and is not for a casual reader, so do your due diligence. I will not claim that I completely understood it or could grasp large chunks of what Bauman was saying - it is a level above me. However, I can absolutely grasp and agree with his primary theory which is that this modern age has turned on its heel and now sees the utopia as our past. It’s pretty depressing when you think about it, and "retropia" is a great term. When I was growing up, it was the future we were looking toward - but now, the past seems so much better. The future seems awful. Bauman lays out why and how that happened, and much of that argument can be made using Hobbes and other writers of the past.

Our relationships are growing ever more narrow as our insecurity grows - we reenter the world of nasty, brutish and short (or the illusion of it). Very complex book - and it's not for a lay reader to skim through at one sitting. But if you're willing to give it a hard read, you will find a lot of gems of observation here. A lot over my head, but I still grasped and appreciated the thesis. The right reader - probably somebody with a degree in philosophy - is going to appreciate this quite a bit.

I'm so very grateful to have this book and author come to my attention. I'm almost ashamed to say that I had no prior familiarity with the work of this author but was so profoundly impressed by the almost lyrical nature of the writing, clarity of ideas and lucid mindset behind the concepts that I immediately went in search of prior works. Yes, this is a dense read and not one that will be undertaken lightly; it is written in a style that requires active participation from the reader rather than the now commonly accepted passivity that passes for reading today. The entire work is filled with substance - forget sitting down to tease one or two nuggets of wisdom from between the pages, this author is generous with ideas and lavish with concepts designed to spark the flame of insight page after page after page. I'm unable to compare this to prior works by the same author but absolutely recommend. Superb.

I personally did not find much to like in this book. My own preferences lean to Stephen Pinker's *Better Angels of Our Nature*, or *The World After GDP*. However, there is good food for thought here, though I found the writing style to be tedious and wordy. Also, there is a difference between wanting to repeat the past and looking at the past to better understand things to make the future better. To better help you judge whether the topic and the author's writing style suit you, here is the author's definition of retrotopia from the Introduction: "What I call retrotopia is a derivative of the aforementioned second degree of negation of utopia's negation, one that shares with Thomas More's legacy its fixity on a territorially sovereign topos: a firm ground thought to provide, and hopefully guarantee, an acceptable modicum of stability and therefore a satisfactory legacy in approving, absorbing, and incorporating the contributions/corrections supplied by its immediate predecessor: namely, the replacement of the ultimate perfection idea with the assumption of the non-finality and endemic dynamism of the order it promotes, allowing thereby for the possibility (as well as desirability) of an indefinite succession of future changes that such an idea a priori de-legitimizes and precludes. True to the

utopian spirit, retrotopia derives its stimulus from the hope of reconciling, at long last, security with freedom: the feat that both the original vision and its first negation didn't try to try or, having attempted, failed to attain. I intend to follow this brief sketch of the most notable meanders of the post-More, 500-years-long history of modern utopia, with an exercise in unraveling, portraying and putting on record some of the most remarkable tendencies inside the emergent retrotopian phase in utopia's history in particular, rehabilitation of the tribal mode of community, return to the concept of a primordial/pristine self predetermined by non-cultural and culture-immune factors, and all in all retreat from the presently held (prevalent in both social science and popular opinions) view of the essential, presumably non-negotiable and sine qua non features of the civilized order. I believe that this passage should let you know whether this book is for you or not.

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