

Davos 2019

## 'This is about saving capitalism': the Dutch historian who savaged Davos elite

Rutger Bregman never intended to take billionaires to task over tax at World Economic Forum



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**R**utger Bregman had not really intended to stick it to the global elite. He never meant to have a pop at the idea that inequality could be solved by philanthropy or inviting Bono to Davos [[www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/jan/23/bono-davos-hiv-aids-aid-spending-global-health](http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/jan/23/bono-davos-hiv-aids-aid-spending-global-health)]. But when the Dutch historian decided to go off-piste at the World Economic Forum and tell the assembled billionaires they should stop avoiding paying tax

[[www.theguardian.com/business/2019/jan/30/historian-berates-billionaires-at-davos-over-tax-avoidance](http://www.theguardian.com/business/2019/jan/30/historian-berates-billionaires-at-davos-over-tax-avoidance)], he became an overnight social media sensation

[[www.theguardian.com/business/video/2019/jan/30/this-is-not-rocket-science-rutger-bregman-tells-davos-to-talk-about-tax-video](http://www.theguardian.com/business/video/2019/jan/30/this-is-not-rocket-science-rutger-bregman-tells-davos-to-talk-about-tax-video)].

“It’s been a crazy week and just for stating the obvious,” said Bregman, when asked about a panel discussion at the WEF last month in which he said the issue was “taxes, taxes, taxes, and all the rest is bullshit in my opinion”.

Bregman had not been to Davos before. He was invited on the basis of the book *Utopia for Realists*, which argued for a basic income and a shorter working week, ideas that have been taken up by some of the Silicon Valley billionaires who show up for the annual event in the Swiss Alps.

But he grew more irritated as the week wore on. Bregman gave a speech to a dinner of technology chief executives and then spoke at one of Davos’s private sessions, off limits to journalists. There he was surprised and maddened by the pushback when he mentioned tax. “One American looked at me as if I was from another planet,” he said.

As a result, Bregman decided to change his plan for a panel on inequality organised by Time magazine on the final morning of Davos [[www.theguardian.com/business/davos](http://www.theguardian.com/business/davos)]. “I went to my hotel room and memorised what I wanted to say by heart,” he said.

“I more or less ignored the question asked by the moderator and gave my speech instead. It was mainly to ease my own conscience: someone has to say what needs to be said.”

What Bregman said, put simply, was the Davos emperors have no clothes. They talk a lot about how something must be done about inequality and the need to address social unrest, but cavil at the idea they might be a big part of the problem.

He told his audience that people in Davos talked about participation, justice, equality and transparency, but “nobody raises the issue of tax avoidance and the rich not paying their share. It is like going to a firefighters’ conference and not talking about water.”

Nothing happened over the weekend. Bregman went back to Amsterdam wondering whether his colourful language was a mistake, but then a video of the Time panel went viral, and it has received millions of views [[twitter.com/nowthisnews/status/1090045108064579584](https://twitter.com/nowthisnews/status/1090045108064579584)] on Twitter alone.

Bregman, 30, is not entirely surprised at the reaction. He said he is part of a generation not traumatised by the cold war and radicalised by the financial crisis of a decade ago. “When we say what’s needed are higher taxes and the response is ‘that’s communism’, we say ‘whatever’,” he said.

“I am part of a broad social movement. Ten years ago, it would have been unimaginable for some random Dutch historian to go viral when talking about taxes. Yet here we are.”

As a historian, Bregman noted the most successful period for capitalism occurred in the years after the second world war, when the top rate of tax in the US was above 90%.

“This is about saving capitalism,” he said. “Most innovation has come about through government spending. During the golden age period [after the second world war], there were way higher taxes on wealth, property, inheritance and top incomes. That’s what we need today if we are going to tame this beast called capitalism.”

Bregman was born in 1988, the year before the Berlin Wall came down. He grew up in the Dutch city of Zoetermeer, studied history at Utrecht University and contemplated doing a PhD before deciding he was not cut out for a career in academia.

“I didn’t want to waste four years on an insignificant subject nobody cares about,” he said. Instead, the global financial crisis pushed him in a different direction.

“I thought that we needed historians to take the stage and explain what’s going on. When I watched the crisis on TV, the only people being interviewed were economists, and these were the guys that didn’t see it coming. I thought that we needed some historians there, so I left academia,” Bregman said.

He spent a year working on a left-of-centre Dutch paper before joining a new journalism platform that paid him a basic income and provided the freedom to write about anything he chose. Utopia for Realists was the result.

Bregman is working on a new book in which he intends to challenge the view that humans are inherently selfish. It is not true, he said, that people revert to their true, nasty selves when the thin veneer of civilisation is stripped away.

“If we assume the best in people, we can radically redesign our democracy and welfare states,” he said.

Bregman bristles at being called an optimist. “I prefer the word possibilist,” he said. Optimists are the sort of chief executives found at Davos, who think globalisation is working, neoliberalism is a good idea and inequality is on the decline, he added.

“A lot of great things are going on. In many ways, the past 30 years have been the best in world history. But we can do much better. I prefer the word hope over optimism,” Bregman added.

So would he make a return visit to the WEF next year?

“I would definitely go. I would just give the same speech. It is going to be a dilemma for them. If they don’t invite me, it will prove my point. If they do, I’ll say the same thing all over again,” he said.