

BOOK REVIEW

Cynthia Kaufman. *Consumerism, Sustainability, and Happiness: How to Build a World Where Everyone Has Enough.*

**New York and London: Routledge
2023, 141 pages**

In the highly accessible *Consumerism, Sustainability, and Happiness: How to Build a World Where Everyone Has Enough*, Cynthia Kaufman traces the connections among three of humanity's most pressing problems: poverty, unhappiness, and environmental degradation. These crises all stem from a world of *not enough*—not enough financial security for everyone, not enough consumer goods to quell an ever-present status anxiety, and not enough habitable planet for existing people and future generations. For Kaufman, we can blame the ideas and processes that underpin capitalism, which are buttressed by elite-dominated political systems that normalize egoism, competition, and acquisitiveness.

Indeed, many people associate capitalism with such high-minded values as liberty, democracy, and prosperity. It is not easy to appreciate the logical connection between the ethos of the free market and its deleterious effects. Yet even those who have done their homework may be overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness in the face of what needs to change, succumbing to what Mark Fisher calls “capitalist realism.” This phrase pertains to the view that there is no feasible alternative to capitalism, that—for all the suffering it wreaks—a world without it remains unimaginable (Chomsky and Waterstone 2021, loc. 44-45). In response to this dearth of both intellectual and political tools for addressing the problem, Kaufman's book aims to “reorient our thinking to help clarify the steps we need to take power back to get to a world of enough” (Kaufman 2023, 2). She is well positioned to do this, having previously written books on the related topics of climate justice, accountability democracy, reconceptualizing capitalism, and theorizing radical change (see Kaufman 2021, 2020, 2012, and 2003, respectively). A socially engaged philosopher, Kaufman directs the Vasconcellos Institute for Democracy in Action at De Anza College, where she facilitates a training program for community organizers.

In this review, I evaluate Kaufman's position against the background of other philosophical stances toward capitalism, in particular those which have come under the heading of neoliberal or libertarian, and even one which purports to be “free-market existentialist.” I also assess her proposed solutions, identifying Henry David Thoreau as the antecedent thinker closest to her in sensibility, at least insofar as Kaufman champions the economic strategy of downshifting. The essay is organized around what

I consider to be the book's four main theses, each of which I discuss and examine, as follows:

1. There exists a set of mutually reinforcing crises, i.e., economic inequality, status anxiety, and climate change.
2. These crises are attributable to capitalism as their root cause.
3. It is possible to get past capitalism in its current form.
4. There are specific policies we can adopt and actions we can take in order to get past capitalism.¹

The Three Axes of Enough

Kaufman begins by establishing the ways that “the three axes of enough”—happiness, poverty, and environmental sustainability—are destabilized in an unfettered market economy, such that they inevitably move toward insufficiency.

In a system geared toward infinite growth, happiness comes to be understood in terms of consuming more and better stuff. But beyond a certain level in which a person's basic needs are met, any pleasure derived from further consumption plateaus, thus trapping him or her in a never-ending hedonic quest. Kaufman (2023, 8) argues that genuine happiness should not be equated to mere hedonism; as the scientific literature shows, its conditions involve trust, security, and a sense of belonging. Thus, achieving social solidarity, not spending should drive our economic decisions.

Solidarity, however, is elusive in societies with high levels of inequality. When not everyone has access to the ways of living that are required to be a full member of society, poverty exists. Counterintuitively, increases in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) do little to eliminate poverty. For example, it is possible for there to be enough food production, and yet for millions of people to be malnourished, suggesting that poverty is, in an important sense, a political choice. This underscores the idea that “We don't have poverty because there isn't enough. We have poverty because of the ways our resources are allocated” (Kaufman 2023, 89).² Furthermore, inequality in a consumerist society exacerbates “status anxiety,” as people struggle perpetually to keep up with their peers. A rhetoric of meritocracy, which tends to ignore the effects of structural injustices, sends the message that it is shameful to be poor, that his or her condition is somehow largely a poor person's fault (Kaufman 2023, 30).

The rampant consumption that is normalized in modern capitalism, together with the levels of inequality that can persist in spite of (or due to) economic growth, cause stress, a lack of a sense of meaning and connection, social dysfunction, and diminished trust. In order to complete the trifecta of hell on earth, there is the environmental crisis, augured by biodiversity loss, ocean acidification, freshwater scarcity, pollution, and climate change (Kaufman 2023, 14). The much-vaunted efficiency associated with market competition takes a huge toll on the environment. Producing goods at the lowest possible cost causes pollution, for example, when manufacturers keep making cheap, non-biodegradable phones (Kaufman 2023, 19-20). The GDP as an index of economic development fails to account for these environmental costs. I must note, however, that Kaufman's claim that economic

activities in free-market capitalism correlate with environmental degradation is not fully developed, perhaps because she has already devoted a previous book to it (see Kaufman 2021). Nonetheless, the claim is strongly supported by Klein (2014) and, more recently, Chomsky and Waterstone (2021).³

Against Capitalism and Mainstream Economics

By discussing its negative effects along the three axes of enough, Kaufman shows that a predominantly capitalistic system—contrary to standard libertarian claims—leads to a world where the majority does not have enough, in fact, where even the better-off cannot seem to have enough. She cites Thomas Piketty’s study showing that systems of inequality ultimately lead to a lack of growth (Kaufman 2023, 73), as well as points to Karl Marx’s insight that workers are alienated from their work in the system of capitalist wage labor (Kaufman 2023, 74). Inasmuch as the system serves the elite, Kaufman (2023, 74) asserts that right-wing politics works for inequality-based policies. This last claim, however, is not adequately supported. It is reiterated later in the book, where Kaufman (2023, 116) claims that right-wing parties use the culture wars in order to gather support for economic policies, which otherwise would not be attractive to their constituents. This reasoning assumes too much about people’s subjective intentions. I do not think we can discount the possibility of true believers, or politicians who support conservative agenda—e.g., against immigration, or against racial and gender diversity—not so much because these principles are economically profitable for them (which, of course, they can be) as because they believe in the principles themselves.

In any case, as part of her overall argument against capitalism, Kaufman critiques the classic theories of economics. She notes that the key assumptions of mainstream economics—such as scarcity, people’s inherent self-interestedness and avarice, and the unadulterated good of profits—run counter to the etymological root of economics, i.e., *oikos*, the Greek word for “home” (Kaufman 2023, 54). The relational qualities of the endeavor that is economics as home management are belied by such concepts as pareto optimality, the ideal market society, and GDP as the foremost measure of economic development.

Pareto optimality tells us to opt for the social policy that increases utility without decreasing the utility of any individual. Since the only goal is to increase utility, without taking into account any judgments about the good life, this principle “imposes arbitrary limits on social policy,” for example, by prohibiting a tax on the wealthy that is intended to create funds for social housing (Kaufman 2023, 57). Meanwhile, in the ideal model of a market society, the balance between supply and demand supposedly sets the correct prices of goods. But there are many forces that impact prices apart from supply and demand, and moreover, markets do not respond to the demands of those who have no money.⁴ Indeed, the inability of the conceptual tools of mainstream economics to account for social realities is perhaps most glaring in the priority accorded to GDP as an indicator of growth. If anything, a high GDP can be a measure of excessive work, overconsumption, insatiable levels of desire, and environmental destruction. It also ignores the economic value of “provisioning,” a catchall term for a

variety of work that is neither done for a market nor controlled by a state, primarily but not limited to caregiving labor (traditionally labor done by women), which may include “wage work, self-employment work, unpaid work, nonmarket work, and paid and unpaid care work” (Kaufman 2023, 62, citing Nancy Folbre).

Getting Past Capitalism

In place of the mainstream approach to economics, Kaufman (2023, 83-84) suggests we turn to solidarity economics,⁵ which

...asks how we can manage the resources of our earthly home, such that people can live well within the ecological limits of the planet. It takes seriously the need to shift toward economies more based on the provision of public goods, more based on ensuring that everyone’s basic needs are met, and where we work fewer hours, and so take care of more of our needs via provisioning, outside of the realm of markets and states.

Using the principles of solidarity economics, Kaufman points to a third way between pure capitalism and pure socialism. In capitalism, economic processes are based on markets as the core of the economy, private property, and the private appropriation of the value of wage labor. Meanwhile, in socialism, the economic processes are run by the state. Solidarity economics can account for vastly different types of economic processes, including provisioning, in recognition that every national economy is, in effect, a mixed economy, i.e., having both capitalist and socialist aspects (Kaufman 2023, 71-72). For example, a national economy can have private for-profit enterprises but also state-run ones in charge of health care, public transportation, public schools, social security, etc.

Indeed, the pressing concerns raised in the book would seem to call for “overthrowing” capitalism, or at least a predominantly capitalist global order. I use scare quotes here because Kaufman cautions against thinking of capitalism as a total system to be overthrown. It is not a unified system but “an underlying set of ideas, as well as a variety of practices, that support and are supported by those ideas” (Kaufman 2028, 5). Creating change requires looking carefully at “forms of agency” that support “capitalist logics” (Kaufman 2023, 75). For example, consider the fossil fuel and agribusiness sectors, whose carbon emission-intensive activities are, in turn, enabled by the fiscal policies of international institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Kaufman 2023, 78). We can fight against these by forming and participating in social movements. A specialist in community organizing, Kaufman points to the efficacy of contemporary social movements, augmented as they are by the incredible reach of social media. Crucial to success is taking advantage of the so-called Overton window, i.e., the window for the widespread social acceptance of previously marginalized ideas, which had allowed the civil rights movement to succeed (Kaufman 2023, 104-105). In short, it *is* possible to get past capitalism, particularly as understood in terms of tangible forms of agency and logics, through the power of alternative stories. In this way, Kaufman avoids the pitfall of capitalist

realism, with its resignation to the inevitability of “the system” and the impossibility of any alternative.

What We Should Do

In Kaufman’s “world of enough,” people do not have to overwork merely to survive, extensive public goods obviate the desire to consume so much, and the planet does not have to pay the cost of infinite economic growth. Toward these ends, she discusses several possible courses of action.

One is to decrease dependency on wage labor, and to develop other ways by which people can get their needs met, such as the provision of a universal basic income (Kaufman 2023, 117-121). In response to the common objection that countries could not possibly afford this, it can be said that it is really only a matter of allocating resources. Instead of funding war, for example, we could fund community colleges (Kaufman 2023, 113).

A significant redistribution of wealth can also be done along the lines of what Picketty recommends in his 2014 book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Kaufman (2023, 109-112) describes an array of taxes—wealth tax, transaction taxes, income tax, estate tax—to be imposed on those whose income has so far enabled them to have so much more than everyone else. As Kaufman (2023, 122) notes, “we need to fight against the misleading ways of thinking that have people believing that what is good for the wealthy is good for all of us.”

There is also the strategy of economic downshifting. I find this to be the most noteworthy among Kaufman’s proposed solutions, primarily because of its sheer simplicity and the way it evokes the ideas of one of my favorite writers, Henry David Thoreau. Downshifting pertains to the voluntary choice to work and consume less (Kaufman 2023, 38). At the dawn of the industrial age in America, Thoreau practiced what is now called downshifting. He built a cottage on the shore of Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts, staying there for two years and earning his living “by the labor of my hands only” (Thoreau 2008, loc. 4). Writing about his experience, he concludes that “Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind” (Thoreau 2008, loc. 14). Indeed, “None can be an impartial or wise observer of human life but from the vantage ground of what we should call *voluntary poverty*” (Thoreau 2008, loc. 14, emphasis added).⁶

Where Kaufman innovates on Thoreau is her emphasis on social connectedness. Thoreau was a staunch individualist, almost misanthropic in his immersion in nature, and on that basis, it can be argued that his way was less effective in bringing about change in his day, but for the fact that he wrote a very influential book. For Kaufman, on the other hand, shifting wasteful consumption is not a task for atomic individuals escaping to their own minimalist hutches in the woods. “Our consumption choices take place within a complex matrix of relationships,” she writes. “... if you want to shift a practice, you need to investigate the ways that aspects of social actions are interconnected and not focus on individuals as your main unit of analysis” (Kaufman 2023, 48, citing Dale Evans et al.). Transforming cultural

meanings is collective work, as when we challenge the idea that driving a car, eating meat, or traveling by plane on vacation are signs of success (Kaufman 2023, 51). As Kaufman (2023, 35) recommends earlier in the book, we would do well to stigmatize luxury consumption.

For our Consideration: A World of Enough

Kaufman's vision of a world of enough is predominantly socialist, as she asserts that markets work best with strong social regulations in place (Kaufman 2023, 68). How does this compare with other philosophical stances on capitalism? She considers the state to be integral to economic processes, which puts her at odds with those who think that an engaged state is only a stone's throw away from paternalism at best and totalitarianism at worst. She criticizes both anarchism and Marxism as unduly discounting the ways that state mechanisms can be an indispensable tool for addressing social problems. For anarchists, the state uses violence to control people; for Marxists, the state is but a puppet of capitalists. For Kaufman (2023, 82), both views miss the salient question we should be asking, which is not whether we should be for or against states, but how we can hold states to account for their actions. We should adopt an "accountability democracy,"⁷ the context in which states can work for the interests of social justice:

Accountability democracy is an approach to power that says that wherever there is a concentration of power, people need to constantly work to hold that power to account by developing accountability mechanisms. Accountability mechanisms work by giving voice to social concerns, getting others to see the importance of a given problem, and mobilizing social resources to limit unjust accumulations of power (Kaufman 2023, 82-83).

As we can see, Kaufman's notion of democracy emphasizes responsibility and social solidarity. This is in contrast to the neoliberal view that prevailed in the twentieth century, in particular during the economic boom and increase in social mobility that followed the two World Wars. That stance on what democracy entails, perhaps best represented by the ideas of F.A. Hayek and Milton Friedman, tried to lay claim on what for them was the original meaning of liberalism, i.e., the freedom of the individual. Any state intervention on individual liberty (which does not impinge on another person's rights) is unacceptable. Hayek (1944, 8-9) equates socialism to totalitarianism, more specifically, the fascism of Nazi Germany.⁸ Meanwhile, Friedman argues extensively that social welfare measures in the United States directly impinge on consumers' right to determine their economic choices, and moreover, that these are not as effective in eliminating poverty as an unregulated market is (Friedman and Friedman 2002, 177-189, *passim*). For Friedman, competitive capitalism as a system of economic freedom is a necessary condition for political freedom (Friedman and Friedman 2002, 4).

Although the global economy today is very different from what it had been during the heyday of neoliberalism,⁹ it is worth seeing how Kaufman's world of enough might respond to these classic neoliberal fears, which remain stubbornly associated with many a policy labeled "socialist." The author is well aware of the possibility that too much state power might lead to corruption, bad economic decisions, and tyranny. However, moving away from capitalism does not necessarily require the existence of a central authority: "If we look at well-run systems that exist already, we can see that, where they are well run, state enterprises are often managed by a patchwork of separate entities at different levels taking care of social needs" (Kaufman 2023, 81). Additionally, if government works in the context of accountability democracy, it can do its job in meeting social needs. As for the dreaded encroachments on freedom that neoliberalism warns against, presumably, in a predominantly socialist economy, one could still purchase a Hermès bag that costs as much as a house, if one wants to do so. However, the greater freedom consists in not being compelled to, especially as we work to transform the cultural meaning of luxury and the endless pursuit of status. As Kaufman (2023, 98) clarifies,

Economics doesn't need to interfere too much in questions of how people want to live. It can develop with a simple commitment to the values required for enough: environmental sustainability, respect for human rights, and increased happiness for people to the extent possible.

One last philosophical stance toward capitalism bears mentioning. Irwin (2015, 1) coins the phrase "free market existentialism" in what he describes as an unusual defense of the free market, which is largely perceived as bad by philosophers from both the analytic and continental traditions. He notes the affinities between existentialism and the ideal of a free market, in particular, the primacy they place on individual freedom and responsibility. An existentialist sensibility might help us enjoy the benefits of a "capitalism without consumerism," as the existentialist chooses meaningful work over an alienating one, and strives not to succumb to the quest for endless consumption (Irwin 2015, 2-5). Setting aside criticisms of Irwin's questionable reading of Sartre,¹⁰ I think his view of persons as fundamentally autonomous, amoral, and rational misses the very real social dimensions of human life—something even the existentialists themselves recognized as part of our being. The lens of a disembodied individualism is inappropriate for diagnosing what's wrong with economic and social life, to say nothing of our frayed connection to the planet. In comparison to Irwin's approach, Kaufman's world of enough gives us better tools to improve the status quo.

To conclude, Kaufman's book well-argued, clearly written, timely, and above all, transformative. It points to a moral imperative to make life more livable for all of us, especially for those who bear the brunt of the economic ravages of capitalism as well as the effects of environmental disasters. As Kaufman (2023, 12) notes, it is people in the Global South who suffer the most despite doing the least to cause the climate crisis. Social justice demands that we move collectively toward a world of enough.

NOTES

1. Inasmuch as the form of these claims echoes that of Buddhism's key tenets, I think of them as the Four Noble Truths of solidarity economics.

2. While the problem of poverty may have been largely eliminated in a few countries in the Global North, where there are higher levels of taxation, low levels of inequality, and strong social safety nets, the case is vastly different for countries in the Global South. As Kaufman (2023, 92-95) explains, such countries have to deal with the legacy of colonialism, debt burdens imposed by transnational institutions, and corrupt regimes propped up with the complicity of the Global North.

3. As Klein (2014, loc. 32) writes, "The twin signatures of this era have been the mass export of products across vast distances (relentlessly burning carbon all the way), and the import of a uniquely wasteful model of production, consumption, and agriculture to every corner of the world (also based on the profligate burning of fossil fuels). Put differently, the liberation of world markets, a process powered by the liberation of unprecedented amounts of fossil fuels from the earth, has dramatically sped up the same process that is liberating Arctic ice from existence." For Chomsky and Waterstone (2021, loc. 6), the capitalist model treats "the planet as either storehouse (of needed resource inputs, including energy resources) and/or sink (for waste products of all kinds, due in large measure to a continually sought novelty, and the concomitant obsolescence of the old)."

4. To illustrate these points, Kaufman discusses the phenomena of homelessness and global hunger. The market rate of housing is impervious to the existence of the vast majority of people who cannot afford shelter; their lack of demand, as it were, does not drive prices down. Meanwhile, despite a sufficient production of food, people can still starve to death, as did the poor in Ireland during the potato famine of 1845-1852, when British landowners withheld grain in order to force the Irish to emigrate. In such a case, "markets did not work to prevent starvation" (Kaufman 2023, 60).

5. Alternatives to mainstream economics tend to eschew the study of rational choice. For a comprehensive account of such alternatives, collectively called "heterodox" economics, see Jo et al. (2018). Solidarity economics, in particular, draws on ideas from feminist economics and the socialist and anarchist traditions (Kaufman 2023, 83).

6. There is not enough space here to elaborate on Thoreau's delightful jeremiads, but those interested in reading his acerbic observations would do well to pick up *Walden*. In the first chapter entitled "Economy," he comments on popular attitudes about clothing, housing, land ownership, modern improvements, the monuments of civilization, and economic trade, among others.

7. For a full development of this idea and its implications for practice, see Kaufman 2020.

8. He writes, "... practically all Germans had become socialists, and... liberalism in the old sense had been driven out by socialism.... the conflict in existence between the National-Socialist 'Right' and the 'Left' in Germany is the kind of conflict that will always arise between rival socialist factions." Hayek dedicates his book to "socialists of all parties."

9. For an up-to-date study of the evolution of wealth and income over the past three hundred years, and the extraordinary growth of capital income that is concentrated in the hands of the top 0.000001%, see Piketty (2014).

10. See, for example, Eshleman's review of Irwin's *The Free Market Existentialist: Capitalism without Consumerism*, in which Eshleman (2018, 97) characterizes the author's reading of Sartre—in particular, the claim that there is no necessary connection between Marxism and Sartrean existentialism—as being obscured by bad faith.

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