



**A**  
**Return**  
**to the**  
**Island**







**A Return to the Island**  
*edited by Helena Lugo*

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The island  
of Utopia is 200 by 500 miles.  
It is crescent shaped like a new moon.  
The sea enters and spreads into a broad bay.  
The bay is quiet and smooth like a big lake.  
It has 54 cities, all spacious and magnificent.  
Each city is divided into four equal parts.  
There are 6000 households per city.  
Homes are redistributed every 10 years.  
Everything in Utopia is as similar as it possibly can be.  
The citizens share a common language and customs.  
There are mirrored institutions and laws.  
Agriculture is the most important job on the island.  
In Utopia everything belongs to everybody.  
No one owns private property and money is useless.  
Nobody possesses more than they need.  
They value what is useful like steel, not useless like gold.  
They excel every other people having a high level of culture.  
They take their meals in common.  
Utopians spend most of their leisure time reading.  
Happiness can only be found in good and honest pleasure.  
They worship a single power: unknown,  
eternal and inexplicable.  
The laws are few, fair and obvious.  
Slaves are criminals or captured in wars.  
People are easygoing, cheerful, clever  
and fond of leisure.  
There is no other place as  
prosperous and happy.  
They have no worry about  
the future.

Map of the island of Utopia. Woodcut by Hans Holbein, from the 1518 edition of Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, printed in Basel

A B C D E F G H I J

U V W X Y Z

K L M N O P Q R S T





## The Imaginary Reconstitution of Leadership

### Bill Balaskas

**L** on 15 January, 1919, one of the most important Marxist theorists and revolutionaries of the 20th century, Rosa Luxemburg, was murdered by the members of a conservative paramilitary group operating in Berlin. A few hours before the incident that took her life, Luxemburg wrote: ‘The leadership has failed. But the leadership can and must be created anew by the masses and out of the masses. The masses are the crucial factor; they are the rock on which the ultimate victory of the revolution will be built’<sup>1</sup>. Although Luxemburg’s last text begins with an admission of failure, it still reflects a strong belief in the ability to transform the world through the power of the masses — a rather optimistic view of the human condition.

Almost a century after Luxemburg’s murder, and in order to mark the quincentenary of the publication of Thomas More’s *Utopia*, Somerset House, in London, commissioned British conceptual artist Jeremy Deller and the Fraser Muggeridge studio to design a flag that would encapsulate the notion of utopia and celebrate 2016 as a ‘Year of Imagination and Possibility’. The flag that the artist and the graphic designers of the studio came up with featured a large, optimistic ‘smiley face’, very similar to the emojis that we use in our everyday lives when exchanging messages on our smartphones, tablets and laptops. For a whole year, the flag will overlook London’s impressive skyline, which is increasingly defined by the presence of skyscrapers that (mainly) host the offices of international financial firms and banks. Although the flag’s face is widely perceived as a symbol with a positive connotation, the most important question to be asked about its meaning refers neither to its emotional character, nor to the geographical direction towards which the smile is oriented (i.e. whether it is facing the City’s skyscrapers in the east, or the Houses of Parliament in the west). Rather, the most pertinent question is associated with the flag’s relation to time: is the face featured in the flag smiling to the future or is it smiling to the past?

In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels break emphatically with the long-established idea that utopia belongs to a lost ‘Golden Age’, turning — instead — their attention to the future. Through this choice, they refute a well-known ‘occupational disease of historians’, as English broadcaster and historian A. J. P. Taylor has called the prevalence of the past in utopianism’s association with time<sup>2</sup>. As it is exemplified by the

*Communist Manifesto*, this orientation towards the future is of particular importance for the political character of utopianism; it leads to it elements of a distinct political methodology. In her 2013 book, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*, British sociologist Ruth Levitas elaborates on the character of utopia as a methodology<sup>3</sup>, by noting that it provides a critical tool for exposing the limitations of current political discourses about economic growth and ecological sustainability. It facilitates genuinely holistic thinking about possible futures, combined with reflexivity, provisionality, and democratic engagement with the principles and practices of those futures. And it requires us to think about our conceptions of human needs and human flourishing in those possible futures. The core of utopia is the desire for being otherwise, individually and collectively, subjectively and objectively. Its expressions explore and bring to debate the potential contents and contexts of human flourishing. It is thus better understood as a method than a goal<sup>4</sup>.

Levitas complements this context by defining the three key aspects of the ‘imaginary reconstitution of society’<sup>5</sup> that can materialise through utopianism. First of all, the archaeological mode of the reconstitution focuses on the ‘excavation of fragments and shards’<sup>6</sup> from the past, which may belong to utopian traditions in politics, literature or the arts. The aim of the ‘excavator’ is not only to reveal those utopian accounts, but also to combine them into a coherent whole. Secondly, there is the ontological mode, which is concerned with the subjects and agents of utopia — namely, the ways in which utopianism may encourage people to change their social, political and cultural behaviours. Finally, the architectural mode focuses on the organisational and/or institutional structures that could facilitate the creation of a better society.

Rosa Luxemburg was murdered soon after expressing her faith in mass political action and its power to produce this better society. The continuation of her revolutionary path towards social reconstitution was interrupted by the utmost expression of political violence. In today’s case, what predominantly interrupts our potential revolutionary paths is something that might appear to be profoundly different, but still remains deeply violent. Notably, in his seminal book *The Society of the Spectacle*, originally published in 1967, French Marxist philosopher Guy Debord argues: ‘Spectacle is the guardian of sleep’<sup>7</sup>. The multiple facades of the sleeping masks could be considered as manifestations of that ‘guardian’. In contrast to Luxemburg’s assessment in her very last text, which begins with the recognition of failure and goes on to identify potentiality, the sleeping masks of the work remain confined to the level of acknowledgement, without alluding to any further steps to be

<sup>1</sup> Luxemburg, R. (1971). *Selected Political Writings of Rosa Luxemburg*, (D. Howard, Ed.) New York: Monthly Review Press, p. 415

<sup>2</sup> Taylor, AJP. (1967). ‘Introduction’ in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*. UK: Penguin Books, p. 12

<sup>3</sup> Levitas largely builds her analysis on Fredric Jameson’s theorisation of utopianism, according to which ‘utopias have something to do with failure, and tell us more about our own limits and weaknesses than they do about perfect societies’ in Jameson, F. (1988). ‘Comments’ in *Utopian Studies*, 9 (2), p. 74

<sup>4</sup> Levitas, R. (2013). *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, p. xi

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xvii

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>7</sup> Debord, G. (2004 [1967]). *The Society of the Spectacle*. London: Rebel Press, p. 12

taken. Rather, and as the object on which Luxemburg's phrase has been embroidered suggests, what follows the realisation of failure is sleep — a sleep of political and social consciousness. This is a sleep that disrupts the main elements of utopia as methodology that Levitas puts forward, given that all the reconstitutive modes that she identifies require an active stance, both on past knowledge and on current social realities.

Today's work of art has to function as an 'antidote' to this sleep, for — by its very nature — the role of art is not that of expressing mere acknowledgements: there is always an implication produced by any (artistic) statement made. However, it is not the artist who will be ultimately called to materialise the implication, but rather the members of the audience. As Levitas notes, leadership provides the direction of the organisational and institutional structures that will nurture utopianism. In a historical conjuncture in which faith in all kinds of structures and organisations is limited, or — even — non-existent, a new kind of *cultural* leadership is called to replace our traditional understanding of political initiation, which appears to have indeed failed. Amid a context of severe economic and ideological crisis, politically engaged art could produce a fertile ground within which to explore those potentialities. Yet, just as the sleeping mask is an object of personal use, the exploration of alternative modes of social, political and cultural being is, before anything else, a personal exploration. The fight for the imaginary reconstitution of leadership is a fight against the passivity of (personal) sleep. Once this fight has been won, the imaginary reconstitution of society may begin.



