‘Ruth Levitas, Utopia as Method’ [book review]

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In 2011 Michael Truscello made a documentary *Capitalism is the Crisis* (available online) which challenged the idea that the 2008 crash exposed imperfections in an otherwise healthy system and promoted radical alternatives to capitalism. Ruth Levitas's book is framed by a similar set of concerns. She identifies a pressing need for social change and argues that market instability, growing inequality, loss of public services, financial mismanagement and ecological disaster can only be resolved through the elaboration of alternative ways of living. Utopia meets this need and the aim of the book is to show how it does, through its elaboration as the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society (IROS).

The book is organized in three sections. The first reflects on the concept of utopia, the second examines the relationship between utopia and sociology and the final section looks at IROS as a method. Each section presents a series of important arguments. The first develops the idea presented earlier in Levitas’s *The Concept of Utopia* which outlines utopia as method. This relies on a particular concept of utopia which Levitas interprets as a universal desire for a better way of living. The concept of utopia as desire generates a hermeneutic method of inquiry and is linked to prefigurative or transformative practices and to the holistic sketching of alternative societies. The second section presents an account of the development of sociology as an academic discipline and argues that institutionalization resulted first in a turn to science and away from utopia and subsequently to a revival of interest in utopia through a postmodern lens. This return, while welcome, wrongly treats utopia as a goal and encourages the anti-utopians’ embrace of utopia. For Levitas, steering sociology back towards a conception of utopia as method facilitates a 'push forward to a less cautious and more imaginative engagement with possible futures, in which utopia is understood as a creative form of sociology'.(149) The final section, which examines IROS as a method, has three parts. The 'archaeological mode' interrogates ideas of the good society by the excavation of social and economic policies. The 'ontological mode' is about the subjects and agents of utopia and raises issues of wellbeing, flourishing and happiness. The 'architectural mode' turns to questions of institutional design. Levitas does not treat these aspects of IROS independently: not only are question of human flourishing intimately linked to conceptions of institutional design, both must also be subjected to archaeological critique. As a method, then, IROS is about uncovering the assumptions that underpin social alternatives. 'The method of utopia' as IROS, Levitas argues, is 'the construction of an integrated account of possible (or impossible) social systems as a kind of speculative sociology'.(xiv)

The purpose of developing this framework is not just to recommend a particular approach to utopia and sociology – in the furtherance of IROS - but also to advance a particular set of principles. Central to these is what Levitas refers to as the ethic of grace. In the first part of the book she turns to Paul Tillich to define grace as 'the reunion of life with life, the reconciliation of the self with itself'.(13) Towards the end of the book she discusses grace with reference to the work of Roberto Unger:

Acts of grace entail refraining from attacking another's exposed or heightened vulnerability … This echoes some vernacular uses of the terms grace, gracious and graciousness, which include the practice of passing over or covering for the weaknesses or social lapses of others rather than exposing or confronting them, thus collaborating in a mutual process of saving face.(188)

Grace is embedded in utopia as method and it features at every level of Levitas's analysis. The results are mixed. While grace serves as a vehicle to explore some rich ideas about being, it also serves to weaken the analytical force of utopia as method and muddy the relationship with IROS. On the one hand, the concept of utopia as desire (on which the framing of utopia as method draws)
is 'analogous to a quest for grace'.(xii-xiii) Since grace is already part and parcel of utopia, it is not surprising to find that it emerges as a 'recurring theme' when utopia is used as a hermeneutic method.(14) On the other hand, utopia as method is concerned with 'the potential institutions of a just, equitable and sustainable society with begins to provide the conditions for grace' (xviii) In this sense, it appears to be identical to IROS rather than a route to it, for IROS, too, is 'always essentially an attempt to establish the institutional basis of the good life of happiness, and the social conditions for grace'.(65)

The range of Levitas's reading is impressive. Bloch, Bauman, Rawls, Rorty, Erik Olin Wright and Michael Young are just some of the authors who feature in the text. Her analyses are not only distinctive but also help carry the broad arguments of the book. The resonances she finds between her ideas and those of other authors fleshes out perfectly the secular humanist values that inform her thinking and a commitment to their realization which is compelling. Nevertheless, her tendency to reference multiple sources in succession sometimes threatens to ride roughshod over important philosophical differences (for example, between Martin Buber's I-Thou relationship, Morris's principle of fellowship, John McMurray's conception of mutual recognition and Emmanuel Levinas's transcendent Other (187)). Moreover, the richness of the discussion can make unraveling the dimensions of utopia as method quite difficult.

The problems are exacerbated where Levitas avoids explicit commentary, as she does from time to time in Morris's case. Morris occupies an important place in the book and is a presence throughout. He appears as a pioneer of utopian sociology, alongside Edward Bellamy and H.G. Wells, and, by his understanding of art's transformative role, as an exponent of 'the possibility of grace'.(215) Yet it's not clear how far Levitas wants to endorse Paul Meier's account of Morris as an orthodox Marxist, which paints him as an advocate of proletarian dictatorship (80), and if so, how this Morris fits either with Absensour's view of Morris as an exponent of the 'utopian marvelous' who wanted 'to awaken and energize desires so that they might rush toward their liberation' (114) or Phillippa Bennett's reading which points to 'the desire to reclaim wonder'.(196) Levitas offers a description of News from Nowhere in the book's second section as well as an account of Morris's utopianism at the end. And the discussions along the way suggest that utopia as method allows for the possibility of different interpretations (with the possible exception of Jameson's 'flat-footed literalism'.(121)) Moreover, she finds the commonality of Absensour's Morris and Bennett's visionary in their attempt to express the 'existential depth' of humanity which Levitas treats as an idea of grace. But this raises another question: if the hardwiring of grace into utopia makes the interpretation of particular utopias and romances secondary to the project of IROS, what role does utopian or dystopian writing play in the elaboration of utopia as method?

The privileging of sociology, freed from both the straightjacket of 'science' and the idea of utopia as a totalizing blueprint, provides one answer. The story Levitas tells of sociology's evolution, in principally UK academic institutions, underplays the influence of Althusserian structuralism and resistance to American historical sociology documented by Craig Calhoun. However, Levitas's main point is to show how the explosion of publishing outside academia – notably feminist utopian fiction – revitalised sociological traditions and promoted utopian sensibilities in sociological theory. The resulting fusion provided 'a way of reading utopia that engages with the actual institutional structure of the present and the potential institutional structure of the future'. (126) Her conclusion reserves an important place for the analysis of utopian writing. Creative works that 'push the limits' of 'possible imagination and imagined possibility' are the mainstays of critical sociology. (125) But not everything goes, because the value of utopias is assessed by the standards of utopia as method and the commitment to IROS. Notwithstanding her criticism of Jameson, Levitas thus argues that utopias should be read literally – though not exclusively so – because '[w]ithout a certain element of closure, specificity, commitment and literalism about what would actually be entailed in practice, serious criticism is impossible'.(125) This view implies a narrowing of IROS's compass of utopian writings. It’s not clear that an outlandish, satirical work like Bolo'Bolo can find a home in this project, notwithstanding its cultural significance. Nor is it clear that heterotopias sit well within IROS’s field.
IROS provides plenty of space for practical utopian experimentation. Occupy, for example, is mentioned at several points in the text. But Levitas's desire to enter into the imaginary reconstruction of society classifies utopia in a particular way and to meet her specific purposes. It is not a coincidence that her final reflections on reconstruction are UK-centric, even though she finds examples of practical utopias across the world. As a call for the development of an imaginative and critical approach to sociology, utopia as method is powerful. But the binding of utopia, understood as method, to sociology seems less persuasive.

Ruth Kinna