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"Fail Better": Utopia, Rosa Luxemburg, and Learning from Failure

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Abstract

The paper explores how Rosa Luxemburg's practice of learning from failure can enrich engagements with failure among scholars of utopia. Recently, scholars of utopia have integrated failure as an unavoidable aspect of social dreaming. Inspired by Samuel Beckett's dictum "Try Again. Fail Again. Fail Better", these accounts view failure not as a lamentable lack but as a valuable opportunity for new experiments in alternative ways of being. Yet what is missing is a sustained exploration of the lived experience of failure as a site of both loss and possibility. Here Luxemburg can prove a valuable resource. Drawing on her theoretical and political writings and her correspondence, I show how her practice of learning from failure accounts for the crushing impact of failure and its productive political value. Thus, it valuably develops the utopian scholars' focus on failing better and offers activists more robust resources to productively engage with failure.

Keywords:

Failure, utopian studies, Rosa Luxemburg, learning from failure, 2011 Egyptian Revolution

Recently, scholars of utopia have integrated failure as an unavoidable aspect of social dreaming. Inspired by Samuel Beckett's dictum "Try Again. Fail Again. Fail Better", these accounts view failure not as a lamentable lack but as a valuable opportunity for new experiments in alternative ways of being and acting (Levitas, 2007). Appeals to fail better importantly speak to the crucial challenge facing activists: how to deal with and productively respond to the inevitable reality of failure in resistance. Yet utopian engagements with failure have primarily focused on "correcting" the way we perceive failure (Thaler, 2023: 436), at the expense of adequately exploring how failure is experienced and negotiated in practical contexts of political action. What is still missing, in other words, is a sustained exploration of the lived experience[1] of failure as a site of both loss and possibility.

This is where, I suggest, Rosa Luxemburg's practice of learning from failure can valuably enrich appeals to fail better among scholars of utopia. Luxemburg was a foremost revolutionary thinker and activist who sought to come to terms with the inherent fallibility of revolutionary politics. Similarly to the recent turn in the study of utopia, Luxemburg viewed failure as an inescapable part of revolutionary politics: not something to be avoided but engaged with. She developed this view in opposition to the two dominant strands of the socialist movement before and during WWI, the reformists and the Bolsheviks. Both strands, according to Luxemburg, sought to ward off the risk of failure, only to ultimately thwart the possibilities for a revolutionary transformation of society (Luxemburg, 2004c, 2004e).

In contrast to both positions, Luxemburg adopted the view of revolution as a path of learning from failure and outlined how experiences of failure, though devastating, can build forms of revolutionary consciousness and collective action that make possible radical change. Her practice of learning from failure, I argue, allows for a deeper recognition of both the crushing impact of failure and its productive political value. Thus, it importantly develops the

utopian scholars' focus on failing better and offers activists more robust resources to weather disappointment and productively engage with failure.

To highlight the practical relevance of Luxemburg's learning from failure, I put her account in conversation with a recent example of political action—the aftermath of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. The Egyptian Revolution represents a paradigmatic case of 'failed' resistance yet has seen creative efforts to learn from failure. I show how the Egyptian activists' efforts to negotiate and productively deal with failure further develop Luxemburg's insights into the lived experience of failure as a site of both loss and possibility.

This dialogue not only advances theoretical understanding of how failure can sustain and revive experiments in social dreaming; it also hopes to promote activists' practical on-the-ground efforts to learn from failure—a crucial task given the deepening ecological, democratic and welfare crises and the persistence of disappointment over radical alternatives we are facing today.[2]

Before proceeding with the argument, two clarifications are necessary. First, Luxemburg may not appear to be a natural ally of utopian scholarship. Her revolutionary writings often refer to utopianism in a disparaging fashion. In her *Peace Utopias*, for instance, Luxemburg rejects the "utopian" efforts to create an era of peace within the framework of the present social order (Luxemburg, 1911). She sharply distinguishes such utopian efforts from the revolutionary standpoint of social democracy which is based on a materialistic analysis of history and claims peace can only be achieved with the destruction of the capitalist class state and international order (Luxemburg, 1911). Nevertheless, several scholars have recently explored the connections between Luxemburg's thought and various utopian projects, such as councils and co-operatives, that seek to bring radical change by experimenting with alternative ways of being in the here and now (Sandoval, 2016; van de Sande, 2022).

The purpose of this paper is to extend this bourgeoning dialogue between Luxemburg and scholars of utopia to the challenge of productively responding to failure. This engagement shows that the challenge of sustaining the utopian impulse in the wake of failure stands at the heart of Luxemburg's revolutionary politics, even as she develops this impulse in a specifically revolutionary direction. Recent utopian efforts to revalue failure can be seen as an attempt to reclaim the imagination of alternative futures against the background of 20th century revolutionary failures and the consequent demise of utopia. Similarly, Luxemburg was concerned that the fear of failure might constrict the scope of revolutionary possibility and sought to revive the commitment to radical change against the dangers of reformism and status quo thinking (Luxemburg, 2004c).

Second, in the context of resistance, we can distinguish between different kinds of failure. On the one hand, failure can arise from external factors, for instance when resistance is defeated because oppressive regimes have doubled down on their repressive policies in the face of protests. On the other hand, it can result from some internal aspect of resistance, such as the failures of leadership or organization, or the reproduction of oppressive patterns of interaction within the resistance movement. Moreover, the two sources of failure can interlink, such as when increasingly constraining political conditions lead the resistance to adopt authoritarian or exclusionary practices. Similarly, external failure can invite an interrogation of some internal aspect of resistance, such as poor organisation or leadership.[3]

My argument proceeds as follows. The first section reviews existing efforts among scholars of utopia to revalue failure as an unavoidable aspect of social dreaming. The second section engages with Luxemburg's exploration of failure as a site of both loss and possibility and outlines how it can enrich engagements with failure in utopian scholarship. The third section puts Luxemburg's learning from failure in conversation with Egyptian activists' efforts to deal with the failure of the 2011 Revolution.

Utopia and Failure

In conventional interpretations, utopianism is associated with the construction of blueprints, detailed elaborations of a perfect future society—what Jacoby has called a "blueprint" school of utopianism (Jacoby, 2005: 8). As such, it has fallen under considerable criticism. Any attempt to mould "society as a whole" in accordance with a static ideal, these critics argued, cannot but betray human plurality and complexity and risks succumbing to the "totalitarian intuition" (Popper, 2013: 68, 74; see also Shklar, 2020). Recently, however, scholars of utopia have challenged this established view of utopia and its relationship to failure. These scholars insist that utopia cannot be reduced to a more or less defined outline of a good society. Rather, in the words of Ruth Levitas, utopia represents "the expression of the desire for a better way of living", which arises from the experience of a lack and incorporates the recognition of necessary failure (Levitas, 2007; see also Cooper, 2014; Sargisson, 2013).

This shift can be traced to Miguel Abensour, who redefined the purpose of utopia in terms of educating desire. Educating desire does not mean assigning it "a goal" but awakening it and inspiring it "to desire in a different way" which is focused on the act or process of imagining (rather than the content of) a different future and is more attuned to the exploratory, experimental, imperfect and fallible character of utopian thinking (Abensour, 1999: 145–46; see also Levitas, 2000: 38–39).

Crucially, in this scholarship, the fallibility of utopia is not something to lament. Instead, failure becomes a valuable opportunity for new experiments in alternative ways of being. To demonstrate this revaluing of failure, scholars often draw on Samuel Beckett's dictum: "Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better" (Thaler, 2019: 1012). But

how are we to imagine this productive potential of failure? And what might it mean to fail better?

The productive function of failure has been perhaps most elaborately developed in Abensour's account of persistent utopia.[4] Building on his understanding of utopia as education of desire, Abensour's persistent utopia challenges visions of "eternal utopia", which, akin to blueprint utopias, resemble the pursuit of a pre-given end, a static, determinate content or solution (Abensour, 2008: 407, 417). Instead, persistent utopianism consists of "a stubborn impulse towards freedom and justice—the end of domination, of relations of servitude, and of relations of exploitation"—that is "reborn," "reappears," and "makes itself felt in the bleakest catastrophe" (Abensour, 2008: 407).

Within persistent utopia, failure becomes a site of new aspirations. Failure as a sense of non-coincidence between "what was projected and what has come about" constitutes a source of a persistent, "always-new upsurge" of utopian imagination in the wake of failure (Abensour, 2008: 407). Failure is a productive experience because it grounds our utopian strivings not in a desire to achieve a pregiven goal but in a desire to go beyond the given, "the ever-reborn movement toward something indeterminate" (Abensour, 2008: 407). This introduces a qualitative shift: utopian thinking is no longer a matter of pursuing ever new utopian visions or places, but of resisting "every process of reification" or closure and instead committing to a persistent questioning of what is given—what Abensour calls "a displacement of the real" (Abensour, 2008: 418).

This shift helps us extrapolate what failing better might mean in practice. First, failing better entails changing one's relationship to past and future failures. The refusal to rely on the criterion of success resists the view that past experiments in social dreaming failed because they were unrealistic or impossible (Gabay, 2022: 285, 288). Past failures are a manifestation of a desire to go beyond the given. Akin to Walter Benjamin's account of redemptive history,

they contain traces of alternative futures residing within the past and serve as an inspiration for future challenges to the status quo (Benjamin, 1974; Goldman, 2023: 155). This changed relationship to past failures can inspire activists to refuse to limit their revolutionary aspirations to those that are likely to succeed within the existing system and instead view their actions in a broader historical perspective. Even if their actions have failed or are likely to fail to produce any immediate effect, they can still find solace in the awareness that they may serve as an example for future experiments in social dreaming.

Second, failing better means displacing any overly confident, static vision of revolutionary transformation that would do "violence to plurality and individual singularity" (Abensour, 2008: 407). This injunction is grounded in the awareness of how easily the desire for emancipation can lapse into "new forms of domination", new attempts to produce closure and supress further innovation (Abensour, 2008: 415; Mazzocchi, 2023: 107–8). Accepting the imperfect, experimental nature of any utopian aspiration, failing better abandons the sovereign desire for a final endpoint or solution and instead commits to keeping any achieved goal open to contestation and a plurality of other possibilities (Abensour, 2008: 417–18).

The appeals to fail better therefore can inspire activists to continue working for a better world despite the risk of failure. At the same time, however, the injunction to fail again, fail better seems disconnected from the lived reality of failure, and only partially captures how failure is experienced and negotiated in practical contexts of political action. Activists' memoirs from different contexts of failed resistance testify to just how painful an experience failure is (Proctor, 2024). Failure may not so easily translate into attempts to try again and fail better in the future. It may profoundly shatter the activists' sense of themselves as political actors capable of changing their world to the better and lead to withdrawal, apathy, cynicism, and disengagement.

Further, the process of embracing failure as an inevitable, productive part of resistance falls short of a detailed examination of failure as a *learning experience*. Failing better, the activists may persist in the struggle in the face of failure, resist closure and keep disclosing new alternatives to the status quo. But it is not clear how they can build on past failures. Appeals to fail better rightly acknowledge an element of inevitable failure accompanying all experiments in social dreaming yet seem unable to distinguish inevitable failure from concrete failures that resistance movements can learn from. This tendency risks reifying failure as a necessary part of social dreaming as such, while robbing the activists of the tools to "separate out", confront and learn from "avoidable forms of failure" (Vogler, 2023: 120).

The key question of how failure can act as a site of new, improved aspirations thus remains unanswered. Beyond encouraging activists to try again and fail again, can experiences of failure also help activists fail *better*? Can they enhance revolutionary consciousness, strengthen revolutionary commitment and build more effective forms of collective power? To confront the experience of failure, as Thaler argues, "it is not enough to correct the way we perceive failure, from denouncing it as a vice to cherishing it as a virtue" (Thaler, 2023: 436). We need to examine how activists can productively engage with and learn from failure in concrete contexts of political action.

Luxemburg's learning from failure

Like recent contributions to the study of utopia, Luxemburg recognised failure as an inevitable part of any effort to build radical alternatives to the oppressive present. Yet she also moved beyond the utopian scholars' focus on revaluing failure. Below, I show how

Luxemburg's learning from failure advances the utopian focus on failing better by examining the lived experience of failure as a place of both loss and possibility.[5]

Failure as a site of loss

I first focus on Luxemburg's insights into the crushing impact of failure. Luxemburg theorised failure as an inescapable fact of revolutionary politics, but this does not mean she remained impervious to disappointment, despair, and hopelessness that she experienced during her political engagement. To the contrary, she was often in despair, enraged, horrified, "almost broken" by what she interpreted as major setbacks of revolutionary politics (Rose, 2011: 15).

Luxemburg's insights into the crushing impact of failure are most evident in her personal efforts to come to terms with the failure of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD – *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*) to oppose WWI. The SPD's fateful decision to confirm the war budget brought Luxemburg close to attempting suicide (Arendt, 1968: 52). She gave voice to her profound disappointment and despair in several letters to her trusted comrades. In her letter to Hans Diefenbach of 1 November 1914, for instance, she writes of the "mood of despair", of the feeling of "wanting to tear one's hair out", and of the "scarcely endurable" "pain" as "former 'friends' commit ever new villainies and vile actions" (Luxemburg, 2013: 361).

Here the gist of Luxemburg's disappointment and despair is directed not at inevitable failures of revolutionary politics but at concrete actions of her "former friends" and the SPD leadership who have profoundly betrayed their commitment to the struggle. In emphasizing this, I am not suggesting that it is easier for activists to deal with failures they ascribe to impersonal forces beyond their immediate control than "the wayward hearts of friends" who broke the "principles to which they had declared their allegiance"—even if this is something

that is implied in Luxemburg's account (Michaelis, 2011: 217). My point is that Luxemburg's lived experience shows the weight of concrete failure that is obscured within utopian scholars' embrace of failure as an inevitable part of social dreaming.

In her battles with despair, Luxemburg tried to find personal consolation in her "modest personal needs": "a good book", "a walk in the meadows" or "music" (Luxemburg, 2013: 361). So, too, she often referred to "the deep, elemental, hidden wellsprings of history" to recover her and her correspondents' hope and moral courage (Luxemburg, 2013: 392). As she writes to Marta Rosenbaum in 1917, during her imprisonment, "I absolutely do not become disheartened" since "history itself always knows best what to do about things, even when the situation looks most desperate" (Luxemburg, 2013: 392).

In addition, especially in her letters from prison, Luxemburg tried to recover a sense of hopefulness about the future by reflecting on the beauty of the natural world. The sightings of animals, images of the sky and clouds represented harbingers of a better world capable of lifting her spirit (Michaelis, 2011: 218–19). In her letter to Sophie Liebknecht of 2 August 1917, she writes that the only way to ward off despair is to "link up with the cheerfulness and beauty of life which are always around us everywhere" (Luxemburg, 2013: 456).

These appeals to a harmonious universe or the hidden paths of history seem to sharply contrast with Luxemburg's steadfast insistence on the primacy of human action. Yet, as Michaelis rightly observes, it would be incorrect to conclude Luxemburg is seeking refuge in a belief in history's inevitable progress towards a socialist future. Rather, these references to history and nature can be seen as "spiritual exercises" designed to cultivate a certain inner disposition—what Luxemburg calls being human—that is at once psychological and ethical-political and that would allow her to remain resilient and persist in the struggle for socialism "even in the face of failure" (Michaelis, 2011: 217). As Luxemburg describes this disposition: "To be a human being means to joyfully toss your entire life 'on the giant scales of fate' if it

must be so, and at the same time to rejoice in the brightness of every day and the beauty of every cloud" (Luxemburg, 2013: 385).

After assuring Rosenbaum that history knows best what to do about things, Luxemburg continues as follows: "I speak this word not as some sort of comfortable fatalism! Quite the opposite! The human will must be spurred on to the utmost, and it's necessary to fight consciously with all one's might" (Luxemburg, 2013: 392). For Luxemburg, then, revolutionary transformation is far from inevitable; it "depends on the strength of the commitment that can be raised on its behalf" (Michaelis, 2011: 217). This means activists need to persist in their commitment even when their plans or aspirations fail. And for this to be possible, they need to combine their revolutionary passion with a kind of inner equilibrium, serenity, or cheerfulness that stems from the ability to appreciate the beauty of the world, even amid all the suffering (Luxemburg, 2013: 456).

Luxemburg's letters are attempts to cultivate this disposition, in herself as well as her readers. These attempts were not always successful, and Luxemburg frequently wavered between hope and despair (Luxemburg, 2013: 437). This shows the profound mental toll of political struggle and the psychological challenges of sustaining commitment in the face of failure (see also Proctor, 2024: 1–3)—challenges that require more than the utopian scholars' efforts to revalue failure. Moreover, Luxemburg's grappling with failure illustrates that no activist can face up to experiences of defeat on their own. As the conversational tone of her letters attests, dealing with failure is an inherently collective enterprise—an insight I return to in the next subsection.

Failure as a site of possibility

After outlining Luxemburg's insights into the crushing impact of failure, I now turn to explore how she develops the potential of failure as a site of learning and possibility. I show how she gives concreteness to utopian scholars' appeals to fail better by revealing how experiences of failure can build forms of revolutionary consciousness and collective power that make socialism possible. In the below analysis, I am interested less in the concrete lessons Luxemburg offers than in how she theorises failure as a learning experience. There are three aspects to this learning from failure that we can unearth from Luxemburg's writings.

First, failure strengthens revolutionary consciousness by clarifying the nature of revolutionary transformation and by building resilience. Luxemburg developed this argument in her *Reform or Revolution* (Luxemburg, 2004c), her response to Eduard Bernstein's theoretical argument for reformism in *Evolutionary Socialism* (Bernstein, 1963). According to Luxemburg, Bernstein's argument for reformism rested on his fear of failure (Luxemburg, 2004c: 157–58). Bernstein argued that the conditions for a proletarian revolution were not yet ripe and that a gradual approach of reform offered a greater chance of success. But for Luxemburg, this view rested on a misunderstanding of "the real course of social transformations" (Luxemburg, 2004c: 158). Bernstein's reliance on the criterion of success postponed the goal of building socialism until conditions are opportune as if the socialist transformation of society "can be realised in one act, by a victorious blow of the proletariat" (Luxemburg, 2004c: 159). In Luxemburg's view, in contrast, revolution resembles "a long and stubborn struggle" in the course of which the activists are likely to experience failure (Luxemburg, 2004c: 159). But these experiences of failure are not a sign that the revolutionary aspirations are premature or overly idealistic (Luxemburg, 2004c: 159). As Luxemburg writes, it is the very experience of failure that allows the working class to "acquire the degree of political maturity" and create "the *political* conditions of the final victory" (Luxemburg, 2004c: 159).

Here Luxemburg's argument echoes utopian scholars' acceptance of failure as an inevitable part of any effort to build radical alternatives within the existing order as well as their refusal to limit one's imagination to only those actions that are likely to succeed. Yet Luxemburg also develops how experiences of failure can strengthen the activists' commitment and determination to persist in the struggle despite the risk of failure.

According to Luxemburg, it is through experiences of failure that activists develop a true revolutionary consciousness—as opposed to, for instance, a reformist one (Luxemburg, 2004c: 165). Failure helps activists grasp the distinct character of the socialist revolution as a revolution oriented to a radical transformation of society (Michaelis, 2011: 205). Through failure, they learn to base their commitment not on whether their efforts are likely to succeed but on their principled adherence to a socialist transformation of society that precisely cannot depend on future success (Luxemburg, 2013: 384). Learning from failure here does not mean that assessments of revolutionary practice should be decoupled from all pragmatic or strategic considerations. It contains a refusal to limit one's revolutionary aspirations to those that are deemed possible or realisable within the existing system (Luxemburg, 2004c: 161–65). Luxemburg's notion of learning from failure, thus, denotes a deeper, more fundamental process of changing consciousness—of building radical, resilient revolutionary commitment that accepts the difficulty of societal transformation and is willing to persist in the struggle over long periods of time, rather than escaping this difficulty and the risk of failure in the comfortable embrace of reformism.

By clarifying how failure can strengthen revolutionary consciousness, Luxemburg moves beyond an embrace of inevitable failure that accompanies appeals to fail better and shows how experiences of failure are linked to a larger horizon of radical societal transformation. This larger horizon of radical transformation cannot be reduced to an eternal utopia that would mould the plurality of the world in line with a pregiven end. As we shall see

in the third subsection, Luxemburg insisted socialism cannot be prescribed. Yet she resists the conclusion following from Abensour's account of persistent utopia that the best we can commit to is a continued open-ended contestation of what is given, while abandoning the possibility of achieving radical change. In contrast, Luxemburg's practice of learning from failure remains oriented to sustaining the activists' commitment to bringing about a radically different future of democratic socialism, even if the exact contours of this future remain undefined.

Second, experiences of failure build revolutionary consciousness because they serve as opportunities for self-examination and learning. Luxemburg's first reaction after the defeat of the Spartacist uprising in Germany in January 1919 was to ask what lessons the failure offered. The Spartacist uprising was an attempt to overthrow the social-democratic, reformist government of Friedrich Ebert and establish a socialist council republic, which was brutally suppressed by army forces. Luxemburg thought the uprising could not be expected to win, as the actions were not well coordinated and the workers did not have the necessary support of the countryside (Luxemburg, 2004a: 375). Nevertheless, she refused to call it a "mistake" (Luxemburg, 2004a: 375). Rather, she called on the workers to "give an account of what happened", to examine the events in their historical significance, reflect on how and why the uprising failed and what all of this means for the onward "storm" of the revolution (Luxemburg, 2004a: 374). As she wrote in *Order Reigns in Berlin*: "What was this recent 'Spartacus Week' in Berlin? What has it brought? What does it teach us?" (Luxemburg, 2004a: 374).

Luxemburg's learning from failure is not limited to the revolutionary moment in question but connects struggles across generations and even across different contexts. She links the defeat of the Spartacist uprising to the long list of past revolutionary defeats, from the Chartist movement in England to the Paris Commune, which represent stepping stones on the path to ultimate victory (Luxemburg, 2004a: 376–77). Our current struggles, she says, stands

on those defeats, which have provided us with "historical experience, knowledge, power, idealism" as well as "our strength and clarity of purpose" (Luxemburg, 2004a: 377).

The specific lesson that Luxemburg draws from the defeat of the Spartacist uprising is the failure of leadership which did not know how to respond to or lead the spontaneous uprising of the masses. The defeat showcases "the contradiction between the vigorous, resolute, aggressive showing of the people of Berlin and the indecision, timidity, and inadequacy of the Berlin leadership" (Luxemburg, 2004a: 378). Accordingly, Luxemburg concludes that "the leadership can and must be created anew by the masses and out of the masses" (Luxemburg, 2004a: 378). Here she echoes her broader insistence—voiced already in her earlier text *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions*—that the direction of collective action cannot be determined by "issuing commands" from some external vantage point, but can only emerge from, and should stay in "the closest possible contact with, the mood of the masses" (Luxemburg, 2004d: 198). Recognising the masses are "the crucial factor" (Luxemburg, 2004a: 378) will allow the organisation of revolutionary action to remain loyal to people's on-the-ground-experience, adaptable and responsive to the changing circumstances of collective action.

Examining failure as a site of learning, Luxemburg mirrors the appeals in utopian scholarship to approach past losses as sites of new aspirations. Similarly to Abensour's persistent utopia, she views individual revolutionary actions in a broader historical perspective where past failures can serve as an inspiration for present and future struggles. However, Luxemburg also concretely outlines how activists can learn from past defeats. She does not suggest that learning from failure will prevent failure for good and ensure the success of the revolution. Nor does her reference to failures as stepping stones reduce the experiences of failure to mere stages in a dialectical, progressive movement of history towards the ultimate victory of socialism that would operate irrespective of the human practices of responding to

failure. Nevertheless, there is a sense—so far missing from appeals to fail better—that activists can build on past failures, adapt their actions to the demands of the revolution and, indeed, fail *better* in the future.

Third, experiences of failure enhance revolutionary consciousness by building the people's capacities for self-rule, namely the capacities needed to effect radical transformation and organise an alternative, free and equal society. For Luxemburg, failure should not be interpreted as a sign that the people's actions are misguided or unruly, in need of correction by the centralised party leadership. She was critical of the revolutionary politics of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, and specifically their tendency to try to secure the success of the revolution by resorting to dictatorial means and eliminating spaces for democratic participation of the people (Luxemburg, 2004e). In this way, Lenin sought to make sure that the movement kept the proper, revolutionary direction. But for Luxemburg he thereby also prevented the development of the people's capacities for self-rule, which can only come about through the trial-and-error process of experimentation and improvisation (Luxemburg, 2004e: 306).

Here Luxemburg echoes the utopian scholars' view that radical societal transformation is not a matter of formulating pre-conceived blueprints to be enacted in practice. As she argues in her critique of Lenin, "socialism by its very nature cannot be decreed" (Luxemburg, 2004e: 306). It is a grave mistake to think that "socialist transformation is something for which a ready-made formula lies completed in the pocket of the revolutionary party, which needs only to be carried out energetically in practice" (Luxemburg, 2004e: 305). For Luxemburg, dictatorial rule will not be able to effect the required "spiritual transformation in the masses degraded by centuries of bourgeois class rule" and inspire "social instincts in place of egotistical ones" (Luxemburg, 2004e: 306). Such social instincts can only be developed "in the school of public life itself," in the process of building a different society (Luxemburg, 2004e: 306).

Yet for Luxemburg experiences of failure are not only something that we need to accept given the experimental nature of radical transformation. She also develops how failure can play a positive, creative function in this process and set the stage for more and more successful experiments in bringing about radical change. As Luxemburg emphasizes in *Organisational Questions of Russian Social Democracy*, "the mistakes that are made by a truly revolutionary workers' movement are, historically speaking, immeasurably more fruitful and more valuable than the infallibility of the best possible 'Central Committee'" (Luxemburg, 2004b: 265). This is because it is through feeling out the ground, trying out, experimenting, testing "now one way, now another" that the working class can acquire "the most intensive political training" and "the accumulation of experience" that will enable it to take responsibility for and direct the nature of the revolutionary process (Luxemburg, 2004e: 305).

Specifically, Luxemburg shows how experiences of failure can cultivate democratic dispositions and the creativity necessary for confronting the difficulties of revolutionary action. The awareness that radical transformation will have to face "a thousand problems" may inspire activists to cultivate democratic and inclusive practices, decision-making procedures and institutions that protect freedom "for the one who thinks differently" (Luxemburg, 2004e: 305–6). This is because practices of democratic debate involving a plurality of opinions can control and correct "all the innate shortcomings of social institutions" (Luxemburg, 2004e: 302). Inclusive institutions and practices that keep open a space for experimentation and creativity enable continuous collective reflection on the shortcomings of existing experiments and how they can be improved. As Luxemburg argues, it is only "experience" gained through the active participation "of the broadest masses of the people" that "is capable of correcting and opening new ways. Only unobstructed, effervescing life falls into a thousand new forms and improvisations, brings to light creative force, itself corrects all mistaken attempts" (Luxemburg, 2004e: 302, 306).

Here Luxemburg implies—as in the case of her correspondence—that learning from failure is a collective exercise—one that cannot be undertaken by any individual alone or dictated from above but relies on bottom-up practices of debate among the many. Thereby, she indicates a crucial mechanism of learning from failure and enhancing the people's capacities for self-rule: building spaces where activists can collectively confront the inherent fallibility of revolutionary politics.

Indeed, her insistence on democratic spaces where activists can collectively reflect on and respond to failure can be seen as an attempt to introduce a mechanism by which revolutionary actions can "fail safely"—leading not to "the comprehensive, irrevocable breakdown" but to "reversible breakdown" as an occasion for "piece-meal and incessant improvement" (Thaler, 2023: 436–37). The incorporation of such mechanisms into the process of revolutionary transformation constitutes an important example of failing better, showing how failure can serve as an occasion for learning, innovation and creativity.

Like utopian scholars, then, Luxemburg embraced the experimental and imperfect nature of any alternative to the status quo. But her learning from failure also goes beyond acceptance to account for how failure can serve as an occasion for the activists to improve the existing arrangements, cultivate the sense of what a successful transformation might look like and develop the dispositions necessary to bring it about.

Failing Better in the Wake of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution

Building on the theoretical analysis developed above, this section engages with a concrete example of political action, the aftermath of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. It shows

how the Egyptian activists' efforts to deal with failure echo Luxemburg's insights into failure as a site of both loss and possibility and give concreteness to the utopian appeals to fail better.

Luxemburg's personal battles with despair reflect the experience of many Egyptian activists who have found it difficult to find solace in appeals to try again and fail better in the future (Lindsey, 2019). For activists whose hopes for the future have been dramatically shattered, it may not only be impossible to revive their commitment and try again. It can also be extremely "painful, even traumatic, to dwell on the past" and draw lessons from the defeat (Lindsey, 2019). As Lindsey writes with reference to the betrayed promise of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, "the scale and ferocity of the defeat of progressive forces has left the losers with little time or space to ponder their mistakes or delusions, let alone to share their thoughts publicly. Even privately, such discussions can be difficult, given the intensely personal disagreements over where things went wrong…" (Lindsey, 2019).

Yasmin El-Rifae—a prominent Egyptian activist and one of the organisers in the feminist group Opantish analysed below—describes how during the course of the revolution she tried to keep her cynicism "in check", "choosing, every time things got violent or dispirited or stagnant, to see the possibilities people were working for all around me" (El-Rifae, 2013). But after the military coup in 2013, she found it hard "not to feel like something has been stolen from me" (El-Rifae, 2013). The words she has tried to write about "these nightmarish days in Egypt" have been "too hollow and disconnected to share" (El-Rifae, 2013). But, she quickly adds, "I'm trying again" (El-Rifae, 2013). As she insists, it is impossible to move forward without confronting the painful reality of failure and asking what we can do with that failure (Lindsey, 2019).

And indeed, on-the-ground efforts of activists to grapple with failure do not only showcase the challenging nature of the task. They also echo Luxemburg's three key insights into failure as a site of possibility. In her memoir of the revolution, *Cairo: Memoir of A City*

Transformed, Ahdaf Soueif shows how experiences of failure can clarify the character of the desired transformation and strengthen the activists' commitment to radical change. The failure of the uprisings, she notes, led the activists to recognise that real change is not possible by removing any individual ruler. It could only be achieved through a more fundamental, radical transformation of the oppressive policies "that marked the Mubarak era", which will take a long time and demand resilience (Soueif, 2014: 213).

As she continues: "We see now that we were never going to clean out the residue of forty years of degradation and corruption in eighteen days, or a year" (Soueif, 2014: 204). Real change will require of us "to clean out the corruption that has eaten into every aspect of our public life" and to "rebuild" the institutions that have been "hollowed out" (Soueif, 2014: 204). This recognition allowed some activists, like the ones that formed the Revolutionary Path Front in 2013, to strengthen their commitment to radical transformation—including the redistribution of wealth and a democratic redesign of state institutions—while accepting the road toward it will be difficult and paved with defeats (Soueif, 2014: 214; The Revolution Path Front, 2013).

Further, in the spirit of Luxemburg's learning from failure, several Egyptian activists approached failure as an opportunity for self-examination and learning. For Alaa Abd El-Fattah—one of the leading voices of the 2011 uprising imprisoned for criticising the military abuses against the protesters—coming to terms with and learning from the defeat constituted "our only hope of seeing the new terrain of struggle clearly" (Klein, 2021: 4).

One of the key lessons El-Fattah himself draws from the defeat is the fallacy of relying on nationalist and masculinist discourses as tools of struggle. In the heat of confrontation, he acknowledges, it is tempting to believe these discourses can be adapted to serve the activists' progressive ends (El-Fattah, 2021a: 280–81). However, these are "pre-packaged discourses inherited from old movements" (El-Fattah, 2019). The state has so completely usurped their

meaning that "whenever we invoke [them] we open the door to relics of the past, relics that seek both to ride the wave of revolution and steer it off its course" (El-Fattah, 2019).

Here, El-Fattah is in conversation with a previous generation of Egyptian activists, specifically the leftist student movement that mobilised in the 1970s against Anwar Sadat's economic liberalisation policy and US imperialism. A prominent representative of this movement, Arwa Salih dissected the failures of her generation in her memoir *Stillborn* (Lindsey, 2019; Salih, 2018). She recounts how the Egyptian regime and bourgeoisie outmanoeuvred the activists precisely by usurping their appeals to national liberation, and resorting to nationalist propaganda to undermine calls for radical socio-political reform (Salih, 2018: 2–5). So, too, she traces the failure of the student movement to the masculinist leadership models and hierarchical organisational patterns that often got in the way of "productive work" (Salih, 2018: 61).

While Salih's memoir ends on a hopeless note, she intends her self-reckoning to act as a lesson for future generations (Salih, 2018: 18). El-Fattah takes up this challenge. His reckoning with the failure of old "pre-packaged discourses" leads him to reflect on how to fail better. As he concludes, new struggles emerging in the wake of the 2011 failure must reject these traps and commit to internationalist and feminist values, "creating novel ways of organising across continents" (El-Fattah, 2021b: 294). Certainly, El-Fattah's concrete lessons differ from the ones Luxemburg drew in her revolutionary activity. Nevertheless, they share a sense that learning from failure can connect struggles across generations and that activists can build on past defeats and fail better in the future.

Finally, Luxemburg's analysis of how experience of failure can enhance the activists' capacities for self-rule can be well-illustrated on the example of Opantish (Operation Anti Sexual Harassment or OpAntiSH). Opantish is a feminist activist group that formed in the wake of the 2011 Revolution against mass sexual assault of women protesters. Its purpose was to

address an important failure or blind spot of the Revolution—the fact that many activists and protesters had not only neglected the issue of gender oppression, but that they themselves were complicit in it. To protect women's right to participate in street protests, Opantish created intervention and safety teams that went into the violent crowds to pull the woman at the centre to safety. However, the ferocity of the attacks meant that the activists were not always able to protect the victim and often risked getting attacked themselves.

In response, the activists developed the practice of debriefing meetings, creating a space where they could collectively grapple with both their failed attempts to save the victims and the oppressive gender attitudes within the revolutionary circles. Discussing their experiences of failed interventions allowed the activists to revise their strategies to better protect both the victims and themselves and develop a very sophisticated structure that minimised the risk and danger of intervening (El-Rifae, 2022: 64–68). The practice of debriefing meetings thus kept existing arrangements open to revision and improvement and honed the activists' capacities to confront the difficulties of revolutionary action.

In addition, the meetings allowed the activists to confront the baffling fact that "it's normal to be both revolutionary and patriarchal […] that someone against military rule can also be a harasser…" (El-Rifae, 2022: 181). In response, they traced the sexual attacks to the broader condition of patriarchal oppression—"an ever-present violence" that made women vulnerable to abuse in public space and made it clear that the sexual attacks were "attacks not only on women as women" but "on women as revolutionaries, as protesters, as citizens" (El-Rifae 2022, 105, 183; see also Wall 2020, 146–47). This realization, in turn, led the activists to reflect on the principles that inspired their interventions. For most of the activists who initiated Opantish, the group's mission was not "just" to save women. Behind the day-to-day activity of intervening was a concrete vision of a feminist revolution that would expand their resistance "beyond Tahrir, beyond protests" and tackle oppressive gender norms that enabled concrete

acts of sexual violence (El-Rifae, 2022: 107). The activists talked about forming chapters in towns across the country, building their base in universities, labour unions and schools, and starting a revolution in the domestic sphere (El-Rifae, 2022: 108).

Collective reflection on experiences of failure did not only lead to an enhanced understanding of what a successful feminist revolution might look like. It also inspired the activists to develop the dispositions required to bring this revolution about. During one of the debriefing meetings, a male volunteer observed that women volunteers in intervention teams were "a liability", that they can easily become "targets themselves" and that "they don't know how to fight" (El-Rifae, 2022: 55). Another feminist activist, however, insisted that the group was "a feminist group," that it should never tell women "that there is something they cannot do in this group" and that it should resist the discourse of "men coming in and saving women, saving their bodies or their honour" (El-Rifae, 2022: 55).

Further, the debriefing meetings offered a space for the activists to voice the difficult emotional experiences of despair, exhaustion and helplessness that arose during their activism—thus echoing structures of care and support enacted by different social movements throughout history, from the Black Panthers to the Black Lives Matter movement (Proctor, 2024: 98–109). To deal with the mental strain of failure, the activists in intervention teams could temporarily also take on less active, but no less important tasks such as taking care of food provisions or the printing of shirts. These arrangements put the managing of bodily vulnerabilities and material needs "at the centre" of their activism (Butler, 2018: 128). For Judith Butler, such practices enact a claim that "bodies who are active agents of resistance are also fundamentally in need of support" and prefigure "a new form of sociality" characterised by relations of equality and interdependency (Butler, 2018: 128–29). Debriefing meetings therefore also allowed the activists to tackle patriarchal patterns of interaction, strengthen their bonds of solidarity and create new, equal relations within the movement.

Opantish's practice of creating democratic spaces where activists could collectively learn from failure represents an important mechanism of failing better that remains underdeveloped in Luxemburg. Their failing better did not result in the desired feminist revolution. Yet it has sometimes managed to challenge the oppressive attitudes towards women in revolutionary circles (El-Rifae, 2022: 81). More significantly, it changed the public understanding of the purpose of the uprisings, foregrounding women's emancipation as an inextricable part of the broader revolutionary demands for dignity and social justice (El-Rifae, 2022: 35).

These examples of learning from failure may seem futile given the ongoing crackdown on activists in Egypt, which has all but extinguished the political space for protest. Nevertheless, they importantly reflect—and further develop—Luxemburg's insights into the potential of failure as a site of learning and renewed resistance.

Conclusion

The paper showed how Luxemburg's learning from failure can enrich appeals to fail better among scholars of utopia. Appeals to fail better may ring hollow without an account of the crushing impact of failure and of how activists can build on past failures. In addition, they risk cultivating a disposition that too readily accepts failure as inevitable or that may find too much comfort in failure. Luxemburg's learning from failure helps avoid these tendencies.

On the one hand, Luxemburg acknowledges the mental toll of failure and demonstrates that sustaining commitment in the face of failure is a difficult task. On the other hand, she clarifies how activists can learn from past failures, creatively adapt their repertoires of resistance to the concrete historical situation and fail better in the future. Luxemburg's version

of failing better, however, is not limited to an insistence on openness, contestation and plurality that marks utopian appeals to fail better. Rather, it remains oriented toward a horizon of radical societal transformation, showing how experiences of failure can build forms of revolutionary consciousness and collective power that make possible radical change.

To highlight how Luxemburg's learning from failure speaks to concrete contexts of political action, I put her account in conversation with the Egyptian activists' efforts to deal with the failure of the 2011 Revolution. Their efforts to fail better further develop Luxemburg's emphasis on learning from failure as a collective experience and foreground the importance of spaces where activists can reflect on and learn from failure through bottom-up practices of democratic debate. For instance, El-Rifae notes that it was possible for the Egyptian activists to remain resilient as long as they had spaces for debate but that this is getting more difficult now given the overwhelming repression under al-Sisi (El-Rifae, 2023).

This, in turn, raises the question of the character and the conditions required for the establishment of spaces for collective learning. Under repressive regimes where such spaces have been eliminated, activists have had to find other ways through which to communicate their efforts to learn from failure to others, such as through letters from prison, as in the case of both Luxemburg and El-Fattah. While these attempts may allow the activists to create pockets of learning in most difficult circumstances, they also lack immediate access to spaces of experimentation and plural debate where their insights could be tested and translated into practice. Further, as the Egyptian case also shows, effective learning might be prevented by profound "disagreements over where things went wrong" (Lindsey, 2019). In such cases, collective reflection on past failures might lead to mutual incrimination rather than a productive discussion about how to move forward. Luxemburg does not discuss these difficulties explicitly, although she generally emphasizes the importance of engaging with different views in an open, inclusive and constructive fashion (Luxemburg, 2004e: 308).[6]

Placing Luxemburg in conversation with the Egyptian activists then also opens an important avenue for future inquiry. Appeals to try again and fail better should be complemented by a detailed examination of the material conditions and political dispositions required to bring into being and sustain democratic spaces where activists could reflect on what happened, build on past failures and fail better, together.

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Notes

[1] Against critics that would see reliance on lived experience as an overly subjectivist mode of inquiry, I follow the existential-phenomenological approach and consider lived experience as offering a unique insight into the intersubjective, worldly character of our political reality (Beauvoir, 1948; Sartre, 1968).

[2] This engagement also parallels contemporary efforts on the left to revive revolutionary commitment in response to left melancholia—a debate I have engaged with elsewhere (Mrovlje, 2023).

[3] I acknowledge failure can have many meanings, depending on how one conceives of the purpose and ends of political action (Feltham, 2013: 17–18). In line with Luxemburg's sensibility, I refrain from assessing the "success" or "failure" of an initiative from an external vantage point, by referring to a set of abstract ends, goals or outcomes it achieved or failed to achieve (see also Cidam, 2021; Sande, 2013). Rather, I adopt an experiential understanding of failure, relying on the perspective of theorists or activists directly involved in these initiatives and what they themselves perceived to be the key failures of revolutionary politics.

[4] Abensour's persistent utopia is not the only account that has sought to rethink utopia's relationship to failure. Failure also represents an intrinsic feature of social dreaming in accounts of grounded utopia, as developed by Laurence Davis and Mathias Thaler (Davis, 2012; Thaler, 2019). I have decided to focus on Abensour's account of persistent utopia because it most explicitly explores the productive role of failure and what it might mean to fail better.

[5] This analysis builds on my previous work on Luxemburg's distinct way of engaging with failure as an inevitable part of revolutionary politics (Mrovlje, 2023) but focuses specifically on the relationship between Luxemburg's learning from failure and the study of utopia.

[6] Here collective efforts to learn from failure could benefit from the broader scholarly debate on the left on how to engage in internal disagreement (Slothuus, 2021; West, 2017).

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