

Crisis in Utopia

On the world's remotest island, under the flag of the Union Jack, live three hundred people. They are trying to realise the perfect society. Now, after two hundred years, the experiment threatens to miscarry.

By Christian Schmidt. Photographs: Manuel Bauer.

Far below John's feet the breakers of the South Atlantic are surging against the cliffs of Tristan da Cunha. Above him clouds are gathering into dark fists. But John has no eyes for it - it is the same picture day after day. John has climbed up to the volcano of Tristan da Cunha to shear his sheep. It is a five-hour ascent through fern forests and slopes of loose lava rock. The wind forces him to narrow his eyes to slits. It rages seven thousand kilometres between Capetown and Buenos Aires, and there is nothing in this watery desert to break its force except this island. Tristan is not just an isolated island lying in the South Atlantic, Tristan is the most remote island in the world.

John has never before climbed the top of the 2,060 metre high ice-covered crater-lake. Before the last steep ascent he halts. Why? Perhaps because he refuses to think of the kind of world lying beyond the horizon? Or on the contrary, because he has no need to glance into the distance, as he has all he needs right here?

John contemplates in silence the miniature landscape at his feet. Three million years ago this one hundred square kilometre island rose from the ridge of the South Atlantic. When the Portuguese navigator Tristao da Cunha discovered the island in 1506, he sailed on without setting foot on it. The solitary rock mass seemed too rough to him, too repelling. Only on its northernmost foothills does the volcano form a narrow, longish spit of land. It only takes John ten minutes on his ancient bike along the bumpy little road, which appears as a thin line from up here, to perform a complete circuit of the island.

John is twenty-eight years old. He has never left his native country. He has never travelled on a train, stood in a McDonald's queue, or sat in a picture theatre.

When John descends again to the coast, in the late afternoon, the setting sun finds a hole in the clouds and transforms the houses of Edinburgh into lumps of sugar strewn onto bright-green grass. In the distance, he can hear the children in school, singing an English folksong; somewhere

a tractor is rattling along. Edinburgh numbers 300 inhabitants. It is the only village on Tristan. The buildings are strewn about loosely, close enough that neighbours can call out to each other, isolated enough that the constant closeness on the island is at least broken at night. John calls the village "The Settlement". He never uses its official name of Edinburgh of the Seven Seas. "We have no need of names." No street names either, not even surnames. On the island of Tristan Christian names suffice. John is the only John there.

Back home, John sits down in his kitchen and waits for Vanessa. The two have been married for two years. Of course John had lifted Vanessa across the threshold, as custom demands. And of course she wore white in church. Here, everything is done the way it is done back home, in the British Empire.

Vanessa, 24, is responsible for the Tristan storehouse. As the South African icebreaker Agulhas brought fresh supplies a few days ago, she has to work overtime to put them away: 5,000 kg cake flour, 600 kg salt, 450 kg tomato sauce, 250 kg peas, and 800 frozen chickens. The next boat won't be arriving for another five months. John will spend a little while longer sitting with her in the kitchen, swapping island news. There is little enough in this tiny world which floats in the ocean, as lonely as the evening star in the firmament. There are no newspapers, no television, no airport, and no hotel. A radio station and a single satellite telephone maintain the island's connection with the world outside. In good weather, a ship needs six days to get here from

Cape Town; eleven days if it's stormy. The Catholic priest has, once again, been seasick during a boat trip around the island, John tells Vanessa, and the next boat is finally due to bring a new stereo set for the island disco. Later on, they will wrap themselves up in their blankets and listen to the wind gathering new strength. It will rattle their windows, as if to mock them: "What are you doing out here?".

The bliss of solitude is not immediately obvious. It lies much deeper beneath the surface. When England annexed the island in 1816, and William Glass, the first settler, started to live here, he set himself and his few companions a number of objectives: everybody works for the common good; everybody helps everybody else; everything is shared; there will be no private property. By doing this, Glass wanted to ensure that his people would survive, and nobody would starve. But at the same time he laid the foundation for a type of social order which, until then, had only existed in theories or novels. Thus, in the middle of the South Atlantic, in maximum isolation, Glass undertook the task of realising the perfect society.

When John, in his pyjamas, lets his two border collies out in the mornings, strong rain is usually drumming down on the ocean; low clouds shrink the world and take away the feeling of isolation. This is the usual Tristan weather. John and Vanessa don't care. You have to be able to swallow the emptiness, or dismiss it with a few quick remarks.

On days like this, Vanessa pushes her long hair under the hood of her oilskin, wipes the mould

from her wet shoes and starts off towards the storehouse. John walks down to the harbour. He then stands on the cliffs, together with a dozen men, hands in the pockets of his blue overalls, and looks out over the grey surface of the water. John is a fisherman - that is his real profession. The island secures its income by the export of lobsters, the "Tristan Cold Water Rock Lobster". The animals are shipped, deep-frozen, to Cape Town, from where they are dispatched to the markets of Japan, France and the USA. But in this weather the men cannot go out in their boats, as it is much too dangerous. So they busy themselves with the chores of an ordinary island day instead: grinding lava for bricks, repairing roads, building dry-walls, preparing empty gas bottles for the return trip to Cape Town. Uninteresting things. The men are in no hurry. Nobody is building a house at the moment. The few pick-up trucks and tractors can continue to avoid potholes, and the supply ship is often late. The record is 77 days.

Besides, John has more urgent things to do. He ought to jump on his Honda and drive out to the potato fields. The rain might wash the seedlings out, and this must not happen. Potatoes are the island's emergency stores, for when the supply ships are unable to unload their freight on account of high seas, or only deliver half. It wouldn't be the first time.

The potatoes also demonstrate how well William Glass' rules are still working, 200 years later: when they have finished looking after their own fields, John and Vanessa first go to help their parents, then their brothers and sisters, and after

that, their neighbours. Should any family end up with a harvest of only rotten potatoes, they will be given other people's potatoes. All supplies are shared: everybody helps everybody else. When a supply ship arrives, men and women form a long queue in front of the storehouse. Tomato tins, beer cartons, flyswats, batteries, boots and underpants are passed from hand to hand. No-one backs off. When John and Vanessa were building their house, the men were standing by, ready to pile up bricks and put on the gable. They well know they can count on John and Vanessa's help in return. No-one asks for payment of any kind. Children have up to eighteen godfathers and godmothers. This helps to share the responsibility. Should two people with equal abilities apply for a job, the decision is made in accordance with their respective incomes: the one who had been earning less until then gets the job. This makes for equality.

Life out here welds people together. The forefathers of the islanders found their way here as whalers, soldiers, sailors and shipwrecked travellers: from Ireland, Scotland, South Africa, Italy, Holland and America. Now they live out here in harmony under the Union Jack, just as though there were no racial conflict among nationalities anywhere in the world, as though it were everywhere as peaceful as it is here: island policeman Conny is unable to recall when he last used the cell in the basement of the administrative building. "Five years ago? Or maybe eight?" He strokes his dark hair under the original English bobby cap. Yes, there had been someone a bit the worse for drink and in need of a rest. He

now keeps rescue equipment in there. And he has never yet had occasion to bring his handcuffs into action. There is just no criminality out here. Where would a thief go after stealing anything?

The closeness of the inhabitants becomes apparent on Saturday - Disco Day! John and Vanessa put on their Sunday best. Vanessa gets up on a chair and takes her freshly washed jeans off the back of the refrigerator. She hangs them under a tree to drain the water out of them, then places them on the heat-exchange coil of the fridge, using it as a drier. John comes out of the shower with his hair wet and combed back flat. He likes the wet look. He saw this somewhere. "Where?" In some picture he rented at the Cape Town video store, 2,787 km away.

There is a rough wooden floor, and in the background a stage with a red curtain. John and Vanessa separate on entering Prince Philip Hall. John goes right, Vanessa left. That's the custom. John's eyes dart all over the place. Who's here with whom? The girls wear fashionable bare-midriff T-shirts, gym shoes with thick soles, objects from that other, unreachable, world which help set the scene. The first CD is put on, a collection of hits of the last few years, Salsa, techno and English Rock. Every song is ear-shattering. Everybody knows the songs: they are the same every Saturday. The islanders fly over the floorboards; they dance by themselves, in pairs, with a baby in their arms; they dance to look beautiful, they dance to court the girls, they dance with abandonment and elegance. Prince

Philip Hall is transformed into a ballroom; storms and loneliness are totally forgotten.

Saturday night is the hour of truth. Here, secret affairs are made public. Of course, John and Vanessa already knew one another from the time they were schoolmates at St. Mary's. There is no way to avoid each other on this island. And at a certain moment you feel what your heart is telling you. When did Vanessa kiss her future husband for the first time? "On a Saturday night." Here at the Disco? At a show? Or outside, under the constantly rattling Union Jack? Vanessa laughs. And remains silent. Tristan is like a sea-shell: knock on it and it closes up.

The singles market on Tristan is a difficult affair. Teenagers start taking an interest in each other at an early age - a very early age. Perhaps because competition is so keen. Whoever makes up his mind first has the best opportunities. They meet somewhere outside under the open sky and lie down in the soft grass, with clouds and the mountain above them. Or else, they meet down at the beach by the stranded ocean-yacht, lying on its side like a dying animal. At the same time, the ship's hull serves as a billboard for declarations of love. "Warren loves Pa ?" - with the ending scratched off. "Warren loves Ami" - crossed through. "Warren loves Natasha" - intact. Next to it, "Shit".

Occasionally, they find each other while still at school. The youngest mother is eighteen. Whoever stays unmarried on Tristan remains that way for a long time. And whoever marries on the island remains married for a long time. There has never been a divorce there. And there never

will be, as that is the Tristan custom. The only way to escape a bad marriage is to flee across the ocean.

Melanie would like to leave. Melanie, 29, John and Vanessa's neighbour, loves her island, but she is sick and tired of the life here. The island comprises her entire world. One evening, when she is delivering freshly ironed laundry to John and Vanessa, she sits down at the kitchen table and confesses her sorrow. There isn't even a neighbouring village, with people you don't see for a couple of weeks and then go to visit because then you would have something to chat about. But here? "I want to live. I feel as if I were suffering from claustrophobia!"

Only once did she leave Tristan, to visit the neighbouring island of St. Helena, 2,200 km to the north. But only for six months. "Now I'm back again." Melanie falls silent and glances up towards the neon light flickering in the storm. Yet, she was lucky in getting her job. Paid jobs are scarce on Tristan. Whoever wants a job has to wait until it becomes available through the retirement of its incumbent. Melanie manages the island's Savings Bank, and whenever a ship arrives, she puts on her courtesy uniform, complete with hat and handbag, and checks the passports. But all that doesn't make her happy; she lacks a challenge - and the right man. Melanie holds up four fingers. There were five girls in her clique. Four of them found love. One finger remains up in the air. "I'm stuck here."

Most of the young women would like to leave the island, either for a short time or for longer - unlike the men. The men have organised their

life in a most satisfactory way, what with fishing, hunting and playing snooker at the pub, and making all the decisions on the island. There has to be at least one female in the island's Council of twelve; at the moment there are two of them. Only once in the island's history did a woman win the election for the office of island chief. After three years she lost her job. Still, the first female island chief did succeed in making professions such as tractor drivers and mechanics accessible to women.

However, she had no success with fishing, which continues to remain the exclusive domain of the men. Why? John doesn't have to reflect for long before he replies, while walking down to the harbour in his oilskins. After seven days of rain, the grey dawn has finally changed into a sunny red. "The job is too hard for them." How can he know that? "That's how it is." There is nothing more to be said on the matter. He continues on his way in silence. Together with his two partners, John gets their small fishing boat ready and sets out to sea. The water is almost black. In spite of the tranquil ocean, John always remains in the vicinity of the shore, underneath the snow-covered summit of the volcano - like a chicken that doesn't dare wander off too far from the mother hen. The weather on Tristan sometimes changes faster than you can change your trousers.

John looks for a suitable position on the island's leeward side. This is where the lobsters are likely to be found, in the calm waters. Or else they may be over there, where the whales are surfacing; John takes his bearings from them as well. The lobster

baskets are flung overboard, one after another. A few hours later, the men will be pulling them up again, filled with lobsters.

John is having a bad day. Ever since the arrival of the Agulhas, he has been feeling ill, and his condition is not improving. Wendy, the island doctor with the big glasses, has prescribed antibiotics for him, but in vain. John is coughing so badly he has to steady himself against the side of the boat. He isn't the only one suffering on the island. One of the Agulhas sailors brought the 'flu with him. The virus was able to spread like wildfire, because the island people live in such isolation that their immune system seldom becomes activated. As there are no germs, they lack defences for them.

In spite of this, John is lucky. He has no asthma, and so is spared any of the stronger effects of the 'flu. As strange as this may sound, John belongs to a minority on the island, for more than half of Tristan's inhabitants suffer from their inherited disease - asthma, and a 'flu epidemic like this could easily turn into a serious threat for them.

These days, the chairs in Wendy's waiting room are all occupied. When - in exchange for a few sacks of potatoes - a ship's captain agreed, in 1827, to bring a number of female immigrants over from St. Helena, in order to alleviate the shortage of marriage partners on Tristan, no-one could have suspected that one of those women was an asthmatic. The asthma spread rapidly, as the islanders, of necessity, intermarry and thus continue to transmit to their children a predisposition to various diseases. Today, all 300 inhabitants of Tristan are related amongst themselves.

The degree of inbreeding is so high that two siblings are at the same time cousins as well, via fifty branches of a family tree.

The spread of asthma was further assisted by the decision of the Tristan islanders not to accept any more settlers. They wish to remain among themselves; the rest of the world can stay outside. When John's great-grandfather Gaetano, an Italian, was shipwrecked on the island in 1898, he was one of the last arrivals. For over a hundred years now, Tristan has been a closed island. No new names have ever been added on the huge family tree in the Town Hall, and no new genes have arrived on the island.

Asthma is possibly not the only consequence of inbreeding. The schoolhouse with its red roof, just above the cliffs, is only half full. In 1988 there were 42 children, now there are only 29: they see in books animals of far-off lands, they learn what a telephone is and how you speak into this strange object. Many young couples on the island are unable to have children. And they remain childless, even if they travel to Cape Town to seek the help of modern medicine. Their nurseries remain empty, and there is nothing to indicate any change in the future.

There is no convincing explanation for this lack of children. The subject is only being discussed in a whisper. Yet the obvious conclusion cannot be avoided: that nature, in this case, regulates itself. In this way, it is preventing a further spread of potentially fatal hereditary diseases. Because of this, the average age has now climbed to over 45 years. By reason of the above, the future of Tristan is now at risk. If the island Council

opens Tristan up for new settlers, who are hoping to create here a new life for themselves, free of wars and catastrophes - then these strangers will interfere with the delicate structure of this perfect society. No-one who is not accustomed to such isolation and loneliness could become accustomed to such a large family. On the other hand, should Tristan persevere with its traditional policy of not admitting new settlers, it's foreseeable that the population of the island will be reduced so markedly over the next few decades that there will be no one left to do the daily chores on the island. In that case, too, the perfect society will not survive.

John is the second-youngest member of the island Council. He is facing a difficult decision, for neither one of these two options regarding the future of Tristan appear to be very promising.

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