Ursula Le Guin and Utopia

Anarcho

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It is with great sadness that I write this for one of my favourite writers, Ursula Le Guin, had died. The *New York Times* called her "America's greatest living science fiction writers" in 2016 but that does not really do her work justice: she was one of the world's greatest writers. It is just that she worked mostly in the Science Fiction and Fantasy genre. And like a few others – Michael Moorcock and Alan Moore spring to mind – also contributed to popularising anarchism outside political circles. Her SF novel *The Dispossessed* (1974) is still by far the best account of an anarchist society, warts and all!

She was a great writer, one of the best ever. Needless to say, she was my favourite SF writer. Her alien worlds were, well, alien. Her characters, actual people and not cyphers. Her message, humane, egalitarian, libertarian, feminist. She died on January 22, so I hope she saw the women's marches across the world for as she put it in the 1980s:

"When women speak truly they speak subversively — they can't help it: if you're underneath, if you're kept down, you break out, you subvert. We are volcanoes. When we women offer our experience as our truth, as human truth, all the maps change. There are new mountains. That's what I want – to hear

you erupting. You young Mount St Helenses who don't know the power in you – I want to hear you."

Her parents were anthologists, and you can tell. Far too much of SF (and Fantasy) is just middle-class, middle-aged, white, 20th century American male (who has read or watched too many Westerns) projected into space (or into a cod-Middle Ages). The lack of thought about culture is made up for by some fancy hardware and battles against a thinly-veiled stand-in for "communism" (i.e., Stalinism). The "harder" the SF, the more banal it appears to be. Not Le Guin. Her cultures reflect *thought*, an awareness that the norms of the current patriarchal, racist, class society are not the only ones. Humanity has provided a diverse range of cultures across time and space, if having an imagination is too much hard work. Much of SF – particularly in its so-called "golden era" – is not particularly imaginative. Again, not Le Guin – her works are imaginative in terms of "alien" cultures.

They were also subversive of the typical reader's assumptions – the hero of the *Earthsea* series is dark-skinned, the main baddies white (and she publically lamented when the TV adaption turned that around). The *Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) addressed gender, by means of a world were humans were genderless except for a week every month during which they could become male or female. Her *The Word for World is Forest* (1976) exposed the horrors of imperialism long before *Avatar* trod a similar path in 3D: but no white, male saviour for the – short, furry and green – natives in the Hainish universe, they freed themselves.

She wrote so many books, short stories, articles, that it would be impossible to cover everything. So instead I will make a few comments about *The Dispossessed* for it is that work – and the related short-story *The Day Before the Revolution* (1974) – that she has a special place in anarchist hearts.

should be given power over the rest. So people will abuse freedom but not power... such is the position of "realistic" people!

So *The Dispossessed* does not contradict communist-anarchism nor undermine it. Those who claim otherwise should read more communist-anarchist thinkers. As Le Guin did – and it shows. The book is a classic – of both SF and anarchist thought.

All of which shows the power and importance of Le Guin's work. Her works are full of *people* and address real issues, like the best SF work it is about *now* rather than the future. She will be missed – but her writings will endure.

First, I must note something written on the *Guardian* webpage after her death. It was an article on what you should read if you had not heard of her before:

"But the physicist Shevek, who is working on a method of interstellar communication called the Principle of Simultaneity, is becoming disillusioned with the anarchist philosophy of Anarres and travels to Urras to find more freedom."

Do people even bother to read the books they summarise? This is a travesty of the book's plot and point. Shevek was not "disillusioned with the anarchist philosophy," he was seeking to make Anarres live up to its anarchist philosophy! He spends a lot of his time on Urras advocating anarchism – if I remember correctly, it is even noted that he was surprised that they allowed him to do so at the Urras equivalent of the United Nations (because his speech is not reported in depth in the popular newspapers). He even compares his academic life to his live in Anarres, considering the academic environment the closest to what he is used to back home – discussion between equals.

And he travels to Urras as part of his struggle to help break the crystallised structures on Anarres – which saw the decision to decline communication with anarchists on Urrras! He did not travel to Urras to "fine more freedom" – he was well aware of the hierarchical nature of the system and experienced it first-hand. He even escapes his "freedom" at the university to join a mass anti-war protest... and he goes back to Anarres to continue to apply his anarchism to the crystallised libertarian society he seeks to bring back to its ideal.

Second, an older comment but one which shares the same apparent unwillingness to understand the book and its message. The SF writer Ken MacLeod, who you would think should know better. I was somewhat surprised to read him proclaim the following:

"It is the absence of political debate, as much as the absence of privacy and the relentless presence of morality, that makes the communism of Anarres, in Ursula Le Guin's anarchist

classic *The Dispossessed* (1974), so oppressive. When her hero Shevek finds himself in conflict with aspects of his society he has no forum in which to express it, no way to find like-minded individuals with whom he might find common ground; instead, his conflicts become conflicts with *other individuals*. He is as isolated as any dissident in a totalitarian state." ("Politics and science fiction," *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003], 230)

I must say that it makes a change for a (ex-?) Marxist to proclaim Anarchism would produce a society which would crush individuality under collective pressure – the usual charge is that we are just extreme liberals whose advocacy of "individualism" would make all forms of organisation and community impossible (Max Stirner is usually invoked, in spite of him having *no* impact on Anarchism until the 1890s). So it would be tempting to ignore this but the argument that social pressure can be oppressive is stronger and so worth discussing – particularly as many anarchists have argued the same thing and indicated how to combat it.

In terms of "absence of privacy," *The Dispossessed* makes clear that people have as much privacy as they like – the environmental limitations of a desert moon pushing towards a more communal set-up. Kropotkin would *not* have liked the predominant system that much – being on record as opposing hotel-like communes in favour of personal homes – but the possibility of personal/family rooms was there and taken up. As for "the relentless presence of morality," any society – apart from the most atomised – will have some general set of social standards. On Anarres, these social standards allow quite a range of self-expression – no sexism, homophobia, etc. However, the negative impact of social pressure is one of the book's concerns – and one which anarchist thinkers have raised.

I'm not sure what MacLeod means in terms "the absence of political debate" as *The Dispossessed* recounts disagreement on

assumptions) then it best avoided (an economy needs to work if the computers crash!).

Anarres, however, manages it with the technologies of the 20th century – or slightly advanced versions – which makes it more relevant and appealing, in spite of its desert moon setting and the impact that has on the libertarian communist society depicted. Sure, Le Guin did magic – in her *Earthsea* books! Anarres presents a society which you could see working *today*, not hundreds of years in the future.

So it is hardly a utopia in this sense, unlike the Culture. In terms of its social organisation, again it is based on federations of syndicates and communities. Again, hardly utopian. Also, the people are people who seem aware of the need to treat others as they would like to be treated themselves. It hardly staggers belief that people brought up with enough to eat, taught to think rather than repeat, treated as people and not resources, would generalise what is now considered the best of us. Its flaws are equally believable – an informal bureaucracy has started to develop and co-operation has started to become conformity.

Shevek and his comrades see the problem and work on a solution which is straight out of anarchist theory. This is because anarchists are aware that people are imperfect and any society we create will be imperfect. We are well aware that even the best society will have flaws and need work. The struggle for freedom does not end with a successful revolution – things crystallise and it needs active minorities to shatter them in a progressive manner.

Is anarchism utopian? No – for its does not postulate anything unbelievable or impossible about humans or social life. It does not seek perfection, just *better* (which would not be hard!). The people who are utopian are those who criticise anarchism – incorrectly, as it happens – for believing in the natural goodness of people rather than recognising that people are bad and who then turn around and say that a few of these bad people

This is not to deny the negative aspects of social pressure – but anarchists are aware of it and build an awareness of this into their ideas. I've quoted Kropotkin already on the need for conflict, for variety. I've also quoted him on the need for individual self-assertion against crystallised social institutions. So, yes, Orwell makes a valid point – but exaggerates it. As does MacLeod with his misreading of *The Dispossessed* – which is full of discussion, disagreement, debate. Both fail to mention that anarchism is aware of the problem and has sought solutions – and Le Guin's book expresses them!

Ultimately, Shevek remains an anarchist, argues for anarchism on Urras and returns to Anarres – for good reasons, as the book makes clear. I cannot envision Winston Smith doing likewise on Airstrip One – or wishing he faced the Thought Police rather than the disapproval of some of his neighbours...

Le Guin, in short, produced a very astute book on anarchism, one aware of the problems and also aware that anarchists had predicted said problems and shown means of solving them. It is a classic – and I gain something new every time I read it. It deserves better than MacLeod's summary – particularly as those comments are refuted by the book itself, as I have indicated.

Third, MacLeod was friends with the late, great Iain Banks. I should say a few words about their respective "utopias." The difference is stark – the culture is, to coin a phrase, a *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (another classic you should read) while Anarres is very much a "scarcity" anarchism (although the standard of living is high, it is limited by the ecology of the desert moon the anarchists settled 170 years before). Which makes *The Dispossessed* a far more realistic work. Banks postulates a level of technology which is, basically, magic and so he magics away all the issues any *real* anarchist society would face. The Culture manages with super-intelligent computers and hyper-advanced technology – but if your system is dependent upon advanced technology (or impossible

Anarres repeatedly: "in the PDC debates in Abbenay" with its "fierce protests" about supplying Urras with raw materials (83); "Anybody can attend any PDC meeting, and if he's an interested syndic, he can debate and vote!" (144); Shevek bringing up sending letters to Urras "at the Physics Federation" (137); the discussion on receiving people from, and sending to, Urras. (291–7). In the latter discussion it is noted that radio contact was disapproved being "[a]gainst the recommendation of this council, and the Deference Federative, and a majority vote of the List" as well the "increasing protests from the entire Brotherhood." (291, 293)

Indeed, much of what MacLeod calls "the relentless presence of morality" is, in fact, *political debate* – particularly in relation to the "personal is political" and so how best to apply libertarian principles in everyday live. Which includes working with other people in syndicates, communities and federations. He seems to forget that organisations are made up of *other individuals* – and as the book make clear, Shevek and his comrades (like others) come into conflict with them in institutional settings, in syndicate and federative meetings by means of debates and... votes!

What of no possibility of finding "like minded individuals with whom he might find common ground"? MacLeod seems to have forgotten that Shevek and his colleagues *form their own group* ("the Syndicate of Initiative") – as can any Anarres inhabitant – and use the resources of their society – as can any Anarres inhabitant – for their own ends. All of which is an expression of free communism – based as it is on individual initiative, free association and use rights to society's resources.

So we have "political debate" (both between individuals, within groups and across society), we have "like-minded people" coming together to fight the institutional and societal problems developing within libertarian communism – a far cry from MacLeod's claims.

How a society described as being so rich in associational life can dismissed as resulting in someone being "as isolated as any dissident in a totalitarian state" is lost on me. To place this in the context of the book, on Urras which is a hierarchical society marked by class and patriarchy, Shevek's room is bugged while a mass protest meeting he speaks at – after escaping from his surveillance – is fired upon by government troops, killing untold numbers, and afterwards State repression sees protesters being rounded up (imprisoned, if not shot).

Is Anarres perfect? No, that is the point of the book – it has evolved into a quasi-bureaucratic system (due to routine administration) based on majority rule (via societal pressure). Yet Shevek and his comrades are able to rebel against these pressures using the principles the society was formed on – nor are they actually stopped from doing so (the little mob which forms to stop Shevek's departure to Urras is ineffectual as well as being obviously spontaneously formed). They are subject to social pressure, disapproval by many others, but they are not – unlike on Urras – shot down or imprisoned for their activities after the appropriate "political debate."

I should also note that Shevek and his comrades' activities are part and parcel of libertarian communism and not somehow against it. As Le Guin makes clear:

"from the start, the Settlers were aware that that unavoidable centralisation [i.e., a town where most of the headquarters of the federations and syndicates were based] was a lasting threat, to be countered by lasting vigilance." (86)

The "syndicate of initiative" is part of this process of "lasting vigilance" – the problem being on Anarres that this vigilance has withered away by becoming crystallised (to use Kropotkin's term). Indeed, in *Mutual Aid* elsewhere indicated that this was a recurring problem during society's evolution – and an anarchist society would also face this danger.

All of which makes you wonder what makes Anarres "so oppressive"? Comparing it to *actual* totalitarian states shows the

city, and the State impose upon the individual" – or the self-managed associations of a free society. The "syndicate of initiative" is an expression of this minority within the libertarian communist society of Anarres. Progress will remain a product of the interaction of the few and the many, but without the vested interests associated with various social, economic and political hierarchies – and the coercive forces they can call upon in a non-anarchist society.

So where does this get us? That Anarchy is not perfect, but we knew that. Like any social system it will have its problems, its contradictions, its areas in need of work – but, then, we have usually claimed Anarchy will simply be *better* than the current system rather than perfect. It will be created by and made up of people, people who will be more rounded and better developed than under hierarchy but still *flawed*. This awareness is why, unlike Marxists, we have always built into our systems safeguards against irremovable imperfections – safeguards such as federalism, election, mandates, recall, socialisation, etc. In short, there will always be arseholes – anarchists just think giving arseholes power over others is not a wise idea.

Sure, in self-management you may often be in a minority – but to see your ideas always be implemented means to either have no groups at all (an impossibility) or be a dictator (or owner, the terms are synonymous as Proudhon noted in 1840). Ironically, the more abstractly individualist a theory is, the more likely it will produce *authoritarian* rather than libertarian social relationships – as shown by Lockean ideologies (like propertarianism). So *not* getting your way all the time, ironically, ensures freedom – both yours and others. More, at least in libertarian socialism (unlike capitalism) you will have the resources available to form new associations if you feel that your current ones are ignoring you and your ideas – as is constantly mentioned in *The Dispossessed* and "the syndicate of initiative" does.

within which the social revolution had not taken place or been crushed).

This is the case with any societal progress you care to think of – civil rights, feminism, the labour movement. They all start with a minority pushing at what is considered "normal" and increasing freedom by flaunting convention – that is, by *direct action*. Progress has *never* been the gift of authority – it has always been *won*. And the majority finally shift – but adding the State to the mix hardly makes those struggles easier. It only makes rolling those victories back easier – just look at the Trump regime, where State power is being used to do precisely that.

All in all, if oppressive social pressure is an issue in an Anarchy – and it can be – adding political (and/or economic) power does not make it disappear, quite the reverse. Does the customary rather than political nature of the pressure increase the totalitarian tendencies as Orwell suggests? Doubtful…

Anarchist theory recognises the key role *minorities* play in social change. Kropotkin stressed it (see "Revolutionary Minorities" in *Words of a Rebel*), as did Emma Goldman (in "Minorities versus Majorities," in *Anarchism and Other Essays*) – and it is obvious. Oscar Wilde's *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* being a must read in this regard. As Kropotkin put it in *Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Ideal*:

"Well, then, those who will work to break up these superannuated tactics, those who will know how to rouse the spirit of initiative in individuals and in groups, those who will be able to create in their mutual relations a movement and a life based on the principles of free understanding—those that will understand that *variety, conflict even, is life, and that uniformity is death*"

Shevek's odyssey is an example of this, of (to re-quote *Mutual Aid*) "the self-assertion of the individual taken as a progressive element" against the "the bonds, always prone to become crystallised, which the tribe, the village community, the

stupidity of MacLeod's assertions. The worse example given in the book is of an artist driven insane by social pressure and its ramifications – which is one of the factors which drive the creation of the "syndicate of initiative." Which must be placed in the context of the high levels of mental illness within hierarchical systems as well as how often people are driven mad as a result of repressive policies decided upon by the "political debates" within Statist systems.

Of course, I am now comparing a work of fiction with *actual* social systems – but Le Guin's book makes you do that because it is quite a realistic utopia, populated by *people* rather than political cyphers. Ultimately, for all its flaws, Shevek still defends Anarres and its principles on Urras and sees its obvious freedoms compared to that hierarchical regime. He returns to Anarres to participate in the growing movement seeking to eliminate the unhealthy developments within libertarian communism. Again, all very much in line with Kropotkin's comments in the "Conclusion" of *Mutual Aid*:

"It will probably be remarked that mutual aid, even though it may represent one of the factors of evolution, covers nevertheless one aspect only of human relations; that by the side of this current, powerful though it may be, there is, and always has been, the other current – the self-assertion of the individual, not only in its efforts to attain personal or caste superiority, economical, political, and spiritual, but also in its much more important although less evident function of breaking through the bonds, always prone to become crystallised, which the tribe, the village community, the city, and the State impose upon the individual. In other words, there is the self-assertion of the individual taken as a progressive element."

So MacLeod's summary of Le Guin's work leaves a lot to be desired – indeed, everything he lists as making Shevek "as isolated as any dissident in a totalitarian state" is simply not supported by the book. Can there be conflict between community and individual autonomy? Yes and here MacLeod is on stronger

ground but he is simply covering ground raised by others, as he notes:

"Orwell's interest in, and aptitude for, politics as a practical art were negligible, but his interest in, and imaginative grasp of, the implications of political philosophies were deep. What he said in a sentence about the potentially repressive underside of the anarchist ideal summarizes most of the message of Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*." (231)

Since MacLeod mentions Orwell, I would think it is sufficient to ask the question whether Shevek on Anarres is "as isolated" as Winston Smith in Oceania to show the weakness of MacLeod's position.

Yet anyone familiar with anarchist thought would be aware that anarchists have also been aware of this danger. Indeed, an awareness of the authoritarian aspects of utopian socialism and their "ideal" communities has always driven anarchism, not to mention the similar – if not totalitarian – possibilities of State socialism.

Proudhon made the same point – against what he termed "Community" and which is usually translated as "Communism." This was why he stressed that while *ownership* should be undivided, *use* had to be divided (see my "Proudhon, Property and Possession," *ASR* 66). Although, I should note, Proudhon was addressing libertarian communism by their comments as that did not exist then. Similarly, communist-anarchists like Kropotkin were aware of this danger (indeed, Kropotkin said Proudhon was right to attack what was called communism in his day). More, anarchist-communists recognised the validity of these critiques and created a *new*, libertarian, communism which addressed these issues as well as building in mechanisms to reduce tendencies towards them in anarcho-communism – for example, Kropotkin discusses its possible impact on individuality in *Modern Science and Anarchy*, in the second section entitled "Communism and Anarchy" (first published in France

in 1913, it is finally out in English translation later this year by AK Press).

So let me be clear what we are talking about – not social pressure and intervention to stop actual anti-social acts (that is, stopping those who do actual harm to others) but rather social pressure against activities some others think of as somehow wrong but which harm no one. The actions of nosy-parkers, busy-bodies, gossips and such like – plus general social disapproval, particularly of those with avant-guard notions and who express them in action.

This can be – has been, in many a small community – a problem. Yes, it can mean no anti-social behaviour but it can also be suffocating. So that is the germ of truth in this objection. However, as section I.5.6 of *An Anarchist FAQ* argues, it is overblown. Particularly in a society which does not have hierarchical relations in production and elsewhere – where most people spend the bulk of their time and so shapes them most (excluding authoritarian education, which trains children to be bored and follow orders in preparation for their time in work).

But, yes, there is a danger – but as with those who take anarchism and conclude, wrongly, an opposition to organisation as such, *the alternative is worse*. For while even the best libertarian organisation can become bureaucratic, no organisation at all would make life impossible. Similarly, public pressure does *not* disappear with laws and authorities – it gets *bolstered* by them.

Take the racism of the Southern States of America, well, that became a *national* issue after the decentralised self-organisation and direct action of the oppressed and their allies in those areas and the *violent* State or State-backed repression against them could no longer be ignored. And it was an example of *centralised political power* backing oppressive social customs *within* the former slave States. Needless to say, we would expect external solidarity to happen in a libertarian society if such a development arose (presumably, in areas