

Marxism and science fiction: A celebration of the work of Ursula K. Le Guin

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In 1973, the newly-established journal *Science Fiction Studies* published a symposium on 'Marxism and science fiction' in its very first issue.¹ Thirty years later, the newly-established journal *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory* published a similar symposium on 'Marxism and fantasy'.²

One of the contributors to the earlier symposium, but conspicuous by her absence in the recent one, was Ursula K. Le Guin, who will be seventy-five years old this year. This is a reason for celebration, since it is also thirty years since Le Guin first published one of her best-known works of science fiction, *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*.³ This is a remarkable work, contributing not just to the genre of science fiction, but also to the utopian political tradition, as well as to our understanding of the political philosophy of anarchism. While *The Dispossessed* certainly has a political 'message', it is not just a political pamphlet or tract that presents that message in a straightforward or simplistic way. Le Guin is a creative writer, in the strict sense of the term, and although her politics are certainly important to her, she never allows them to get in the way of her work as an author whose intention is to produce a work of literature: a work of art. As a result, and as the subtitle of the novel suggests, she possesses sensitivity towards the ambiguities and the complexities of human existence to a remarkable degree, especially insofar as questions of ethics are concerned.

Ethics are a central concern for Le Guin. This is true in all her writings, including in her so-called 'children's' literature, *The Earthsea Quartet* novels,⁴ which in fact deal with what might legitimately be considered to be 'adult'

issues. While avoiding 'moralizing' and preaching simple solutions to serious moral problems, at the same time, in all of her work, Le Guin writes as a 'moralist': as someone who—in the manner of the ancient Greeks, the young Marx and anarchists such as Kropotkin—considers humans as being by nature ethical animals, and who, as a result, has an overriding interest in the ethical dimension of human existence. Le Guin wishes to stimulate and encourage her readers to think in ethical terms even if, in the end, it should transpire that they make substantive ethical judgements that are different from her own.

Despite Le Guin's overt commitment to anarchism, the ethical vision that underpins *The Dispossessed* has a striking affinity with what, in recent times, has come to be known as 'ethical Marxism'.⁵ Contrary to contemporary post-modernists, who follow Nietzsche and maintain that—whether we are talking about the natural world or the social world, science or ethics—the only order that there is in the universe is that which human beings themselves impose upon it, Le Guin maintains that in both science and ethics the world is intrinsically an orderly and not a chaotic place. She insists that the order that is to be discerned in the world is *not* 'one imposed by man or by a personal or humane deity.' On the contrary, there are 'true laws—ethical and aesthetic, as surely as scientific' which 'are not imposed from above by any authority, but exist in things and are to be found—discovered.'⁶

This is the attitude of someone who has been strongly influenced by the philosophy of Taoism.⁷ But it is also the attitude of someone who is a moral realist and a humanist, who holds views currently unfashionable amongst those who have been influenced by the philosophies of postmodernism and post-structuralism. These remarks indicate Le Guin's commitment to the idea that there is a universally-valid ethical order; a moral law that applies to all human beings; a law that is in some sense 'natural' rather than a purely social 'construction', and which is therefore discovered by human beings rather than made by them.

In another of her essays, Le Guin tells us that what underpins her commitment to this ethical vision is the assumption, which she considers to be 'essential,' that 'we' human beings 'are not objects' but 'subjects'. Hence, 'whoever among us treats us as objects is acting inhumanly, wrongly, against nature.'⁸ She insists that 'if you deny any affinity

with another person or kind of person, if you declare it to be wholly different from yourself' then you inevitably deny its 'spiritual equality' and hence also its 'human reality.' In her view, 'the only possible relationship' we could have with an 'other' thought of in this way is 'a power relationship' and not an ethical one.⁹

Considered from a moral point of view, the adoption of such an attitude is, in her view, undesirable. In words that might have been inspired by Marx's *Paris Manuscripts*, Le Guin states that one reason for this is that it results in the 'alienation' of ourselves from another human being or person that is an inevitable consequence of our attempting to enslave them, or reduce them to the status of a 'thing'. For Le Guin, if you have alienated another person in this way, then you have also in effect 'alienated yourself,' and have, in consequence, 'fatally impoverished your own reality' as a human being, as a moral being.¹⁰

In *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin describes this attitude as 'propertarian'. Much in the manner of Erich Fromm,¹¹ she considers this the attitude of someone who seeks to 'have' or 'possess' another; to treat them as an item of property, a slave, rather than respect them as a free being, a fellow human being, equal to themselves in the cosmic order of things (TD, 48, 50). In terms of the philosophy of Taoism, those who seek to enslave others in such a manner have most definitely departed from the 'way'. This is the ethical vision that Le Guin had in mind when she wrote *The Dispossessed*, and with which she associates anarchism properly understood. It is the ethical vision of the central character in the novel—the brilliant physicist, Shevek.

At the heart of *The Dispossessed* is Shevek's ultimately successful attempt to produce a new unified theory of time—a 'General Temporal Theory'—which will allow the practical development of the 'ansible'. This is a communication device allowing instantaneous communication between individuals on separate planets, even if they are light years apart, and a development that will ultimately lead—as we discover in the other works of science fiction in Le Guin's *Hainish Cycle*—to the creation of the 'Ekumen', or 'league of all known worlds' (TD, 195, 229–30, 284). Shevek's home planet is Anarres, the social organisation of which is based on anarchist principles. However, Shevek's views on physics are so original that they find little favour on Anarres and he feels compelled to go into exile, to the state of A-Io—a

fictional representation of the contemporary United States—on the planet Urras. There, for a number of reasons, he is well received—not least because of the obvious ‘practical’ uses, both economic and military, to which his work in theoretical physics might be put.

In *The Dispossessed*, the moral outlook to which Shevek subscribes acknowledges only ‘one law’: the principle of equity or fairness. This is the only law ‘he had ever acknowledged’ (TD, 14). For Le Guin—just as for Kropotkin and the classical anarchist tradition of the nineteenth century, with their assumption that, in the cosmic order of things, all human beings are by nature equal—this one moral law amounts to a commitment to the principle of equality. It is the law of human equality (TD, 164), which is also the law of solidarity or of ‘mutual aid between individuals’ (TD, 249). It is his commitment to this one law that leads Shevek to criticise the political system of the state of A-Io, because it will ‘admit no morality outside the laws’ (TD, 20), and which prevents him, unlike the inhabitants of A-Io, from ‘looking at foreigners as inferior, as less than fully human’ (TD, 19). It is by reference to this moral law that Le Guin has Shevek criticise the various hierarchical social institutions that he encounters in A-Io. For example, he is quick to notice that ‘status’, and the establishment in social relationships of who is ‘superior’ and who ‘inferior’, is a ‘central’ issue in Ioti life (TD, 22).

Shevek first observes this when traveling from Anarres to A-Io at the beginning of the book. At one point, he refers to the doctor who attends him as ‘brother’ but, after the doctor’s departure, he realises that he had spoken to him in Pravic, ‘a language he could not understand’ (TD, 24). On another occasion, when speaking to the Ioti physicist Pae, Shevek expresses dismay that Pae seems unable to recognise him as an equal and insists on referring to him by the title ‘doctor’, which on A-Io is a badge of social superiority. Pae’s response to this admonition is to apologise for having offended Shevek by referring to him as ‘doctor’, but also to point out that on Urras *not* to do so would be offensive, since ‘in our terms, you see,’ this ‘seems disrespectful’. For Pae, to treat another Ioti as one’s equal ‘just doesn’t seem right’ (TD, 73).

Last but by no means least, and as seen in Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Word for World is Forest*,¹² this is the ethical vision that underpins Le Guin’s commitment to feminism and her attitude towards gender relationships

in *The Dispossessed*. Shevek is not long in contact with Ioti society before he reflects on how wrong it is that, in order to 'respect himself', the doctor Kimoe 'had to consider half the human race as inferior' (TD, 22). Moreover, he is dismayed once again when he discovers that some Ioti women actually support the system of gender relationships on A-Io, by apparently consenting to the reduction of themselves to the status of a 'thing', an object to be used by others, in this case by men, for the purposes of sexual gratification. At one point, for example, he notes that the character Vea 'was so elaborately and ostentatiously a female body that she seemed scarcely to be a human being' (TD, 180) and that, as such, 'in the eyes of men' she was 'a thing owned, bought, sold' (TD, 182).

It has been said on more than one occasion that Le Guin is a profoundly 'dialectical' thinker.¹³ Certainly, as far as ethical questions are concerned, she has a tendency to think in 'binary' terms. She recognises that good and evil—or right and wrong—considered from one point of view may not simply be *different*, but actually *reversed* when considered from another. Again—typically—even in her 'children's' literature, Le Guin's attitude towards the fundamental ethical dilemmas of human existence, as a creative writer, is to resist the temptation to 'take sides', to commit herself to just one of the two opposed points of view, or to think in simplistic 'either-or' terms. Rather, she encourages her readers to think for themselves, and to engage with the complexities of the ethical dilemma in question, whatever it might be.

Le Guin enjoins her readers to rise above each of these limited and partial perspectives of what is good and evil or right and wrong, and to see the strengths and weaknesses associated with 'both sides' of the story. In this respect, the vision that inspires her creative writing has a striking resemblance to that of the ancient Greek tragedians, especially Sophocles, of whose *Antigone* Hegel thought so highly, for reasons towards which Le Guin would be sympathetic.¹⁴ It is the ethical dilemmas confronted by her central characters, and the conflicts of moral duty with which these are associated, which interest Le Guin most. From this point of view, the best way to read *The Dispossessed* is to see Shevek as an erstwhile 'tragic' hero, who is placed by Le Guin in a situation where he is confronted by two conflicting moral duties—duties which, on the surface, appear irreconcilable: one, as a citizen of Anarres, to uphold the

values of his own society; and the other, as a scientist and hence a citizen of the world, to pursue 'the truth' in science come what may, for the ultimate benefit of all human kind.

Le Guin has been criticised in the past for a number of reasons. Some feminist writers have questioned the theoretical assumptions upon which Le Guin bases her own commitment to feminism: in particular, her endorsement of the principle of essentialist humanism and her insistence that it is not possible for us to relate ethically to anything which is entirely 'other' than ourselves.¹⁵

Le Guin has also been criticised by Marxists, basically for two reasons. The first is that there is no strong sense of the importance of political economy, in her work, for our understanding of the things that she considers to be morally wrong—for example, American involvement in Vietnam, which provides the background for her *The Word for World is Forest*, first published in 1972. The second is because, as a result, she has little to offer when it comes to the question of what those opposed to such things on ethical grounds could actually do about them in practical terms: for example, by creating a political organisation committed to opposing them.¹⁶

The Marxist critique may have appeared to possess greater force thirty years ago than it does now. At that time, most Marxists—with the honourable exceptions of Herbert Marcuse and Ernst Bloch—still had a tendency to think, along somewhat 'orthodox' lines, that they should be opposed on principle to any kind of ethical critique of capitalism, or to any kind of utopian speculation, both of which were then considered to be irredeemably 'bourgeois'. The fact that Le Guin was and is a self-professed anarchist cut no ice with her then-critics, who considered anarchism to be nothing more than a pseudo-radical form of liberalism. Today, however, such criticisms seem much less persuasive. Those who still consider themselves Marxists are, on the whole, much less sectarian and much more sympathetic to Le Guin than Marxists have been in the past.

When someone is a creative writer and an artist, while at the same time being committed to a particular ideological position in politics – whether Marxism or anarchism – it is inevitable that this will create tensions. To the extent that one overtly preaches a particular political message in one's work, it is to that extent that the value of the work in question as a work of art will be diminished. To the extent that one is

keen to preserve the integrity of a novel as a work of art, to that extent it is inevitable that one's own political commitments will become diluted in the process. Le Guin has been criticised in the past from both sides, both by those who think that she is overly didactic in her work, and by those who think that her work is not sufficiently committed when it comes to raising the level of political consciousness of her readers.¹² In the case of *The Dispossessed*, in my view it is arguable that she gets the balance about right.

The political significance of *The Dispossessed* is not so much that Le Guin tells her readers what to think, offering them the 'right answers' to the moral and political problems with which it deals. How could she do that, given that her intention was to write a science fiction novel and not a political pamphlet? It is, rather, that Le Guin engages her readers with these problems, and encourages them to think about them for themselves.

Perhaps the most important thing about Le Guin's work is the fact that it stimulates and encourages her readers to think in ethical terms—something that, especially in the young, Le Guin considers to be an important contribution to the development of character. In particular, in both her 'children's' literature and in her science fiction, Le Guin seeks to stimulate and encourage the development of the creative imagination: the ability that, in her view, all human beings natively possess to imagine entire 'worlds' that are radically different from and ethically superior to our own. To encourage this is, of course, at the same time to suggest that there might also be a possible alternative future for our own world.

This is where the political significance of Le Guin's work as a creative artist truly lies. This is, again, an attitude that puts one in mind of the work of Herbert Marcuse in the area of aesthetics and politics.¹⁷ In a marvellous essay entitled 'Why are Americans afraid of dragons?', which might have been inspired by the humanist Marxism of Erich Fromm, a one-time member of the Frankfurt School,¹⁸ Le Guin neatly summarises what she considers to be the political significance of her work:

'I believe that ... an adult is not a dead child but a child who survived. I believe all the best faculties of a mature human being exist in the child, and that if these faculties are encouraged in youth they will act well and wisely in the adult, but if they are repressed and denied in the child they

will stunt and cripple the adult personality. And finally, I believe that one of the most deeply human, and humane, of these faculties is the power of imagination: so it is our pleasant duty, as librarians, or teachers, or parents, or writers, or simply as grownups, to encourage the development of that faculty of the imagination in our children, to encourage it to grow freely, to flourish like the green bay tree, by giving it the best, absolutely the best and purest, nourishment that it can absorb. And never, under any circumstances, to squelch it, or sneer at it, or imply that it is childish, or unmanly, or untrue. For fantasy is true, of course. It isn't factual, but it is true. Children know that. Adults know it too, and that is precisely why many of them are afraid of fantasy. They know that its truth challenges, even threatens, all that is false, all that is phony, unnecessary and trivial in the life they have let themselves be forced into living. They are afraid of dragons because they are afraid of freedom.¹⁹

These remarks, first published in 1974—the same year as *The Dispossessed*—remain as valid today as they were then. In my view, no matter what legitimate criticisms might be brought against Ursula K. Le Guin or anarchism in other areas, a Marxism that does not feel able to respond positively to such sentiments—a Marxism that is not a libertarian Marxism—has definitely lost its way.

Notes

1. 'Symposium on change, science fiction and Marxism: Open or closed universes?' (1973), in *Science Fiction Studies*, no. 1, pp. 84-98; reprinted in R. D. Mullen and Darko Suvin (eds.) (1976) *Science Fiction Studies: Selected Articles on Science Fiction 1973-1975* (Gregg Press) New York, pp. 48-58.
2. 'Symposium on Marxism and Fantasy', in *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory* (2002), vol. 10, no. 4.
3. There are many editions. The one I have used is Ursula K. Le Guin (1975 [1974]) *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (Granada Books) London. This edition has 319 pages, and page number references to it are preceded, in this article, by the letters TD.
4. Ursula K. Le Guin (1993) *The Earthsea Quartet* (Puffin Books) London.

5. C.f. Lawrence Wilde (ed.) (2002) *Marxism's Ethical Thinkers* (Palgrave) London.
6. Ursula K. Le Guin, 'Dreams must explain themselves', in *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction* (1979) Susan Wood (ed.) (Perigee Books) New York, p. 49.
7. In 1997, Le Guin published a 'translation' of the *Tao Te Ching*: Ursula K. Le Guin (1997) *Tao Te Ching: A Book about the Way and the Power of the Way*: a new English version by Ursula K. Le Guin with the collaboration of J. P. Seaton (Shambhala Press) Boston and London. For Le Guin and Taoism, see Dena C. Bain (1985) 'The *Tao Te Ching* as background to the novels of Ursula K. Le Guin', in Harold Bloom (ed.) *Ursula K. Le Guin* (Chelsea House) New York, pp. 211-224; also Elizabeth [Cogell] Cummins, 'Taoist configurations: *The Dispossessed*', in Joseph de Bolt (ed.) (1991 [1979]) *Ursula K. Le Guin: Voyage to Inner Lands and Outer Space* (Kennikatt Press) New York, pp. 153-79.
8. Ursula K. Le Guin, 'Science fiction and Mrs. Brown', *The Language of the Night*, p. 116.
9. Ursula K. Le Guin, 'American SF and the Other', *The Language of the Night*, p. 99.
10. Ibid.
11. Erich Fromm (1979 [1976]) *To Have or to Be* (Abacus Books) London.
12. Ursula K. Le Guin (1997 [1969]) *The Left Hand of Darkness* (Virago) London; Ursula K. Le Guin (1980 [1972]) *The Word for World is Forest* (Panther Books) London.
13. See James Bittner (1984) *Approaches to the Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin* (UMI Research Press) Cambridge, Mass., pp. 16-18; Rafael Nudelman, 'An approach to the structure of Le Guin's SF', in *Science Fiction Studies: Selected Articles*, p. 249; Darko Suvin, 'Parables of de-alienation: Le Guin's Widdershins dance', in *Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction* (1988) (Kent State University Press) Kent, Ohio, p. 145; Donald Theall, 'The art of social-science fiction: The ambiguous utopian dialectics of Ursula K. Le Guin', in *Science Fiction Studies: Selected Articles*, pp. 293-4.
14. Hegel, G.W.F. (1962) *Hegel on Tragedy*, edited by Anne Paolucci & Henry Paolucci (Doubleday) New York.

15. See Samuel R. Delany, 'To Read *The Dispossessed*,' in *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw* (1977) (Dragon Press) New York, pp. 239-308; N. B. Hayles, 'Androgyny, ambivalence and assimilation in *The Left Hand of Darkness*,' in Joseph Olander & Martin Harry Greenberg (eds.) (1979) *Ursula K. Le Guin* (Taplinger Press) New York, pp. 97-115; Naomi Jacobs, 'The frozen landscape in women's utopian and science fiction,' in Jane L. Donawerth & Carol A. Kolmerten (eds.) (1994) *Utopian and Science Fiction by Women: Worlds of Difference* (Syracuse University Press) New York, pp. 190-202; Tom Moylan, 'The Dispossessed,' in *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (1986) (Methuen) New York and London, pp. 91-120.
16. See, for example, the critique of Le Guin in Frederic Jameson, 'World reduction in Le Guin: The emergence of utopian narrative,' in Mullen & Suvin (eds.) *Science Fiction Studies: Selected Articles*, pp. 251-60; and Nadia Khouri, 'The dialectics of power: Utopia in the science fiction of Le Guin, Jeury and Piercy,' *Science Fiction Studies* (1980) no.7, pp. 49-61.
17. C.f. Herbert Marcuse (1979) *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Macmillan) London, which was published the year Marcuse died.
18. For the attitude of the Frankfurt School towards science fiction generally, see Carl Freedman (2000) *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (Wesleyan University Press) Hanover and London. For Freedman's reading of Le Guin, see 'The Dispossessed: Ursula Le Guin and the ambiguities of utopia,' in *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, pp. 111-28.
19. Ursula K. Le Guin, 'Why are Americans afraid of dragons?' in *The Language of the Night*, p. 46.