

Anarchy in Outer Space

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Portland science fiction writer Ursula Le Guin's latest and most straightforwardly political novel is not, properly speaking, utopian at all. A bona fide utopia does not admit of ambiguity, contradiction and conflict, and the anarchist society of the planet Anarres which Ms. Le Guin describes is rife with them. Despite its futuristic and otherworldly setting, it would be more apt to class the book as a work of social realism.

The society of Anarres is founded on the teachings of Odo. Centuries ago, Odo inspired a revolt against the "propertarian" class system of her home planet of Urras. Her followers depart Urras for Anarres, where they set out to replace class, hierarchy and political authority with a system of mutual aid and voluntary cooperation. Now, centuries later, Anarres approximates the anarchist ideal. The means of production are held in common, rather than owned by a small class of individuals, and everyone has equal access to the necessities of life. Work, though evenly distributed, is entirely voluntary, and is organized into small, decentralized workers' syndicates. There is no government, only an administrative network which coordinates the work of the syndicates and syndicate federations through the issuance of computerized information (the author is careful to emphasize that this is an anarchism of advanced industrial technology and not of nostalgic pre-urban tribalism). Strict equality prevails in all social — including sexual — relations.

The question that arises to disturb this purportedly smoothly-functioning society is this: What happens to a genius, a person of rare and perhaps eccentric gifts, in such a strict egalitarian society? Can such a society accommodate and make use of its geniuses, or will it inevitably repress and destroy them? The fly in the anarchist ointment is Shevek, a scientist seeking to develop a Unified Field Theory that would reconcile Quantum and

Einsteinian physics. Shevek's quest not only challenges the prevailing beliefs of his culture but also draws him off into a closed, hermetic world of his own, and he is looked upon askance by his more gregarious fellows.

The conflict is temporarily suspended when Shevek journeys to the home planet of Urras. The purpose of his trip is to explore Urrasti physics, which, because of that world's emphasis on individual achievement, is far more advanced than physics on Anarres. Ill at ease in his native anarchist society, he finds himself completely out of place in the corrupt, egoistical, poverty-ridden world of Urrasti capitalism. As the chapters alternate between past and present, between his gradual disillusionment with the selfless conformism of Anarres and his more rapid disillusionment with the selfish individualism of Urras, Shevek increasingly comes to see himself as a natural revolutionary and as the legitimate heir of Odo's original teachings. When he discovers that the Urrasti State — as any state would — intends to appropriate his work for war-making, he initiates an anarchist revolution on Urras, then leaves for Anarres to initiate a rejuvenation of anarchism there. The story ends with him still in transit and with the central conflict, therefore, still unresolved.

Whether the authority of public opinion in an anarchist society might not turn out to be just as coercive as the authority of the state it replaces is a question that has plagued anarchist theory from the beginning. "We don't cooperate, we obey," Shevek exclaims. "We fear our neighbor's opinion more than we respect our freedom of choice." Le Guin, in true anarchist fashion, raises this problem without offering a neat, final solution to it. In fact, anarchism may have no satisfactory solution to the problem, just as liberal democratic capitalism has no solution to the problem of economic inequality and Marxism none to the problem of individual rights against the state.

The Dispossessed, being much more of an explicit political tract, lacks the descriptive richness and intense psychological subtlety of Le Guin's previous novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness*. But there is a continuity of theme. As in the latter, where she compares a highly centralized Soviet-style communism very unfavorably with a decentralized feudal monarchy, Le Guin

in *The Dispossessed* gives the back of her hand to the Marxist-Leninist centralists, describing their society this way: "One power structure controls all, the government, administration, police, army, education, laws, trade, manufacturers. And," she adds curtly, "they have the money economy."

Speaking of centralization, what was happening on Earth during all these centuries when anarchism was thriving on Anarres? "My world, my Earth, is a ruin," an inhabitant reports. "A planet spoiled by the human species. There are no forests left on my Earth. The air is grey, the sky is grey, it is always hot.... We saved what could be saved, and made a kind of life in the ruins, in the only way it could be done: by total centralization. Total control over the use of every acre of land, every scrap of metal, every ounce of fuel. Total rationing, birth control, euthanasia, universal conscription into the labor force. The absolute regimentation of each life toward the goal of racial survival."

Compared to this eventuality, not all that distant from where we are now, the kind of society represented by Anarres looks good — even though, as in any society of mortals, its health requires the rejuvenating tonic of nonconformity.