"The Caveats of Utopia: A Language of False-Certainty"

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Every time I passed through the library doors with Ursula Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, an alarm sounded. No matter how many times I had the book desensitized, a loud screech would alert the librarians that I might not have the authority to possess the book. Since I did check the book out properly, then what was the alarm identifying? The alarm noted a relationship which immediately defined me: I borrowed the book, so I was a borrower. The alarm was a signal to question my identity as a borrower. Luckily, my possession of *The Dispossessed* was repeatedly validated, but the incident brings up the relative nature of identity. The librarians had a sense of me of a person defined by the relationship I had with the material. Language defined the terms upon which my identity was understood: words limit subjects to understanding each other as defined by their relationship. Even though language has no absolute function of identification as theorized by Saussure, people falsely comprehend each other based on these words. This mistaken comprehension is a phenomenon Hegel notes as sense-certainty, and Ursula Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* illustrates how language is an institution which perpetuates sense-certainty for the societies of Anarres and Urras. Shevek, a temporal physicist from Anarres, travels to Urras to develop a Theory of Simultaneity which would overcome the sense certainty perpetuated by the two planets’ inability to communicate simultaneously with each other. The two planets' sense certainty of each other is accepted as truth which inhibits their understanding of themselves through dialectic. The Anarresti are unable to fully comprehend themselves as a society because their sense of themselves is based purely on the negation of their colonial homeland Urras; Shevek’s invention of the Theory of Simultaneity will fail to reshape the institutions of language upon which identity and consciousness are mistakenly comprehended because sense-certainty is embedded within the Anarresti language system.

Hegel, a German philosopher of the 19th century, proposed a condition known as of sense-certainty which inhibits the achievement of self-consciousness through the dialectic. In “The Master-Slave Dialectic,” Hegel proposes that awareness of self-consciousness can only be achieved through a confrontation with and recognition of an other as a “being for self” (Hegel 542-543). This confrontation, the dialectic, must be a conflict in which an individual feels his life is threatened by the other. The other is
a being whose difference threatens the individual’s being-for-self, his ability to act according to his own will (Hegel 543). However, he does not achieve self-consciousness if he only respects his own being-for-self. Within *The Dispossessed*, this dynamic is historicized in Anarres’ separation from Urras. Years prior to the commencement of the narrative, the capitalist government of Urras gave a group of revolutionaries the planet Anarres in an attempt to quell a war (Le Guin 84). Instead of engaging in war, which would be a physical instance of the dialectic, Urras relieved the tensions by giving the Anarresti revolutionaries a place to be and exist. According to Hegel, though, being is not enough to achieve self-consciousness. An individual must risk his life to earn his agency, yet the Anarresti were given the planet of Anarres to create a home. The collective ideologies they founded their society upon were permitted rather than earned and their being-for-self as a society is not fully recognized by the Urrasti. The Anarresti question why they sell their ores to the Urrasti, and “cooler heads” give the response that it is cheaper for the Urrasti to trade off world and that if Anarres was to break the trade agreement, the Urrasti would respond violently (Le Guin 82). Urras only recognizes and perceive Anarres in terms of how they can personally profit from the colonial relationship; they do not recognize the other as individual. The Anarresti are also subject to the same risk of not recognizing the other as a being-for-self, and this led to a miscomprehension of national identity: sense-certainty.

Shevek, the protagonist of the novel, is the first traveler between Anarres and Urras and his journey reveals the misperceptions sustained within this interplanetary dialectic. As Anarres is a separate planet to Urras, an ‘other’ planet, the Anarresti are perceived as other. However, the Anarresti’s conception of self is a product of an internalized sense-certainty. According to Hegel, the other is first apprehended only as it is immediately, like “ordinary objects” or “shapes of consciousness which have not yet accomplished the movement of absolute abstraction” (Hegel 541-542). This is to say that upon recognition of an other, an individual cannot understand it as an independent consciousness but only as it appears in relation to the subject. In his book *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel introduces this miscomprehension as sense-certainty. Sense-certainty is an apprehension which is accepted as
comprehension, which he warns is only the immediate perception of the object and not any absolute
"truth" (Hegel 58). When Shevek travels to Urras, he makes it a specific point to identify himself not as
an emissary of Anarres but as a physicist (Le Guin 67). To identify himself as Anarresti is to assert a
particular identity: his self would be determined by the Urrasti as one who has come from community of
Anarres. Hegel notes that apprehension carries a risk and that "in apprehending [a subject], we must
refrain from comprehending it" (Hegel 58-59). The understanding the Urrasti would have of Shevek if he
came as an Anarresti and not a scientist would be based upon apprehension as determined
comprehension: perception is accepted as certainty in language. The signifier 'A-n-a-r-r-e-s-t-i' that the
Urrasti use to identify the people of Anarres is based on the signified community of Anarres: they are
people who are part of an ideological community other to Urras. However, language does not merely limit
the Urrasti's understanding of Anarres: it also limits the Anarresti comprehension of their selves.

When Shevek is a child, he identifies himself as an Anarresti – a person who belongs to the
community of Anarres. His comprehension of his identity is based upon his membership in a society.
According to Benedict Anderson, author of *Imagined Communities*, all communities are imagined and
that they perceive themselves as "limited and sovereign" (Anderson 5-7). This is to say that any
conception of community, such as national identity, beyond daily interactions is foremost an
organizational structure which links all people of a particular unifying ideology or nation – or, in this
case, planet. A society also supposes itself to have boundaries, and that it lends itself to a superiority over
that which is not included. Discretion becomes a means of identification and valuation. Shevek identifies
himself not merely as an individual but as a member of a discrete community. When Shevek is a child and
discusses going to Urras with his friends, the conversation turns to their conception of themselves as
Anarresti. Shevek states: "We don't leave Anarres because we *are* Anarres" (Le Guin 40). He is linking
communal identity to ideological territory; his people don't desire to leave Anarres because they *are* what
compromises the community of Anarres. Anarres is not merely the physical planet; the planet serves as a
material representation of community. As such, he doesn't understand why anyone would want to be
outside of the planetary boundaries which rearticulate the discrete Anarresti social identity. Even if Shevek left the planet Anarres, his sense of himself would not change because he perceives himself foremost an Anarresti. The word Anarresti isn’t linked to any direct concept; there is nothing concretely Anarresti, not even the planet, yet Shevek comes to realize that the people of Anarres comprehend themselves based on this relationship of self to society. Anarresti is a socially determined organization of people who share a particular set of ideologies, but it is accepted as an operative identity—an absolute value. This misapprehension of social identity as a concrete value is a product of language over space and time which leads to an understanding of self and other based on sense-certainty.

From birth, Shevek was instructed to speak a particular way and use a language system that perpetuated the Anarresti sense of absolute identity. They perceive themselves as Odonians, disciples of their first revolutionary, Odo, and Shevek explains to an Urrasti that "everybody on Anarres is a revolutionary" (Le Guin 67). The origins of their community dictate that they are the negation of an other. The Anarresti's understanding of self and the world is defined by what it is not: a world of hierarchical ownership and capitalism. This perception of Anarres as an inherently preferable system of values is reinforced by the language they speak. As a child, Shevek tries to take a nap in the sun and he is crowded by another baby. He shrieks "Mine sun!" and the one-eyed matron of the nursery admonishes: "It is not yours...nothing is yours. It is to use. It is to share. If you will not share, you cannot use it "(Le Guin 24). The principle of sharing and community overtake the principles of personal ownership in language. The ideas which the words are signifying become the foundation for which words should be used. In turn, this limits their comprehension of themselves. The matron is one eyed and cannot see the world from two angles; she is limited to a single perception of the world, evidence which suggests an undermining of the utopian collective of Anarres. Since the Anarresti only use terms of collective, it reinforces a false sense of universal community. While it may appear that everyone is sharing on Anarres, this collectivity is limited to the Anarresti society. Darren Jorgenson, author of "On Failure and Revolution in Utopian Fiction and Science Fiction of the 1960's and 1970's," states that the Anarresti revolution is doomed to be
corrupt, that "its isolation [is] an attempt to foster revolutionary purity but actually fostering pathologies of paranoia toward capitalism" (Jorgenson 10). Because the Anarresti are trying to not be Urrasti, their social structure cannot be utopia except in relation to Urras. Their comprehension of their social identity is perceptually a utopia, but it is not inherently one. Since the society of Anarres is a socially determined identity, it's value is relative to the subject who is perceiving. The Anarresti will not be able to communicate with others as people because they cannot understand the Urrasti as beings-for-self since they are inhibited from understanding themselves in their sense-certainty.

Shevek's theory sought to redefine the mode in which the Anarresti could communicate with other planets, but it is not merely the means of communication which inhibits understanding. The primary narrative focus of the novel is the life of Shevek and his pursuit of the Theory of Simultaneity which would lead to the production of the ansible, a tool which would "permit communication without any time interval between two points in space" (Le Guin 303). His means of communication would destroy the geographical and temporal gap between one world and another. They would no longer be separated by time and space. As the Terran Ambassador Keng phrased it when learning of the ansible, "We can talk - at last we can talk together" (Le Guin 304). Even though the societies of Anarres and Urras are not solely determined by their spatial location, this spatial gap inhibits communication between the two communities. Prior to the emergence of the ansible, this difference reinforced each planet's sense of each other's identity as other. The very way the novel structures the identifications of the societies is structured upon ideological division: the societies are Anarresti and Urrasti -- self and other, depending on which planet Shevek is on. While the Anarresti and Urrasti are both human, the overriding point of identity is the society they identify themselves within. This conception of themselves as nations is problematic because it is a sense of themselves which is based on relative position.

The primary reason why the Anarresti perception of self inhibits the achievement of self-conscious is a result of the arbitrariness of language. Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of linguistics whose ideas were recorded posthumously in "Course of General Linguistics," theorizes that "linguistics
then works in the borderland where the elements of sound and thought combine; *their combination produces a form, not a substance*” (Saussure 857). This is to say that simply because the sound-image 's-o-c-i-e-t-y' is linked to the concept 'society,' 's-o-c-i-e-t-y' is not inherently linked to the concept 'society.' Furthermore, the concept society has no concrete valuation; the arbitrary word is merely a signifier linked to an arbitrary value. Saussure states that "values are entirely relative;" the arbitrary connection between a word and its concept is determined externally by social convention (Saussure 857). However, this relationship perpetuates the false-comprehension of identity: sense-certainty. Since the concept which the word Anarresti is signing is also an conventionally determined value, their identification of themselves as Anarresti corresponds to no absolute Platonic value – yet it is perceived as such. Tirin, a childhood friend of Shevek, states: “…there are people sitting on a hill, up there, on Urras, looking at Anarres, at us, and saying, ‘Look, there’s the Moon.’ Our earth is their Moon; our Moon is their earth.” (Le Guin 26). In this instance, the Anarresti society can only identify itself and Urras as self and other, not recognize each other as participants in dialectic. The dialectic is a conflict of seeking self and other. Since the Anarresti have a sense-certainty of their identity which is rearticulated in the language they use to differentiate between self and other, the dialectic ceases to occur because there is no perception of threat or need for discovery. The caveat of Anarres is that it is a collective society based on community, yet its sense of community is limited to itself.

While the Anarresti principles of brotherhood and collective sharing are appealing, they are limited in scope. When Shevek is speaking to an Urrasti on his way to Urras, Shevek observes that "Each [of us] took for granted certain relationships that the other could not see. For instance, this curious matter of superiority and inferiority...they often used the word "higher" as a synonym for "better" in their writings, where an Anarresti would use "more central" (Le Guin 13). Shevek acknowledges that he and the Urrasti don't understand each other and that this misunderstanding lies in the words they use to describe social relationships. The reason the initial revolutionaries revolted against Urras was because they were not content with the superior/inferior value system of capitalist Urras, but instead of completely
disavowing the notion of relationship, the Anarresti shifted it from a top down model to a centralized model. This reaffirms Anderson’s theory of imaginary communities: the Anarresti perceive themselves as a more central community which is perceptually superior to a hierarchical government. While Anarres appears to be a utopian society in relation to Urras, the language it uses to structure these utopian ideals of community and centrality are inherently flawed. “More central” still carries with it a locus, an ideological point which is most in accordance with the principles. If there are ideas which are more central, then there will also be ideas which are considered less central. This is dangerous, because it leads to the valuation of ideas not on their value but on a sense of their value relative utility.

Anarresti principles of centrality are based on relative values and the relativity of centrality will inhibit them from communicating effectively. They ascribe value to Shevek’s theory based on its relation to the Anarresti community and perceive this as an absolute identity value. One example of where centrality is revealed to be flawed in The Dispossessed occurs when Shevek is a young boy in school. He stops the class to propose an idea, the idea that a rock will never be able to hit the tree because it will always be halfway between any two points (Le Guin 25-26). He is proposing an early example of the Theory of Simultaneity: the rock can never hit the tree because at any given moment people perceive it as being in relation between two points. It is a model of the stagnant dialectic. If the Anarresti have only a comprehension of self as a fixed then no dialectic can occur over time because everything which is apprehended is falsely comprehended as it appears. Sense-certainty prevents the Anarresti from internalizing change over time. Their comprehension of selves is static. The teacher admonishes Shevek, saying "Speech is sharing—a cooperative art. You're not sharing...This kind of thing is really directly contrary to what we're after in a Speaking-and-Listening group" (Le Guin 26). The teacher is saying that because Shevek's ideas are not beneficial for the group, they are not valuable. This value system is arbitrary: the value of the concept Shevek is trying to explain is being purely determined by its relationship to the group. Because Shevek’s teacher can only perceive the idea in relation to the group and the collective, the value of the idea is not judged according to whether or not it is a well-reasoned theory
but according to whether or not it is disruptive to the collective. Since the Anarresti are still valuing ideas arbitrarily, this valuation of centrality will inhibit them from communicating simultaneously over time with the other.

Centrality runs the same risk of superiority as capitalist profit motive: instead of higher and lower ideas, some ideas will not be central enough. Shevek's idea is dismissed because it is not conducive to the group, not because the idea is poorly wrought. This is the way that language limits understanding: by the teacher identifying the idea as it is relative to the class, the teacher accepts the value of that idea based on how it is related, not as it is. Jorgenson explains that Le Guin depicts Anarres as a utopia, but "she outlines not only the joy of living in this anarchist society, but also the limits of this joy, which ultimately drive Shevek off-world" (Jorgenson 9). While centrality may be preferable to superiority, it still perpetuates relativism which results in a sense-certainty of the world. So, when Shevek grows up and wants to publish a piece called Principles of Simultaneity on Anarres, his publisher Sabul won't publish his controversial findings unless Sabul is listed as co-author (Le Guin 212-213). At first Shevek refuses to coauthor the book because it would involve sharing the ideas, but his wife, Takver, insists that "It's the book that's important – the idea" (Le Guin 212). Shevek initially perceives his ideas like the Anarresti perceive themselves: in relationship to an other which obscures any actual consideration of the values which are being related. He goes on to publish the book as coauthor, but eventually he is unable to develop the theory further on Anarres because the scientific community is threatened by his ideas. When proposes traveling to Urras, the system of government on Anarres tries to stop his journey by "legalizing" him and his dissenting ideas in the same way the Urrasti bought off the original revolutionaries with the moon (Le Guin 323). He refuses the official, more central, posting and travels to Urras where he finally develops his complete Theory of Simultaneity.

Shevek acts as the narrative mediator between the twin planets, and through his function as a traveler the flaws of the relative Anarresti utopia are exposed. Simon Stow, author of "Worlds Apart: Ursula K. Le Guin and the Possibility of Method," remarks that "the connection between critical theory
and exile is a strong one... The very nature of exile makes one a spectator. It is this existence as a spectator—one who lives between worlds but never fully part of either—that generates the strong possibility of critical insight" (Stow 41). Although Shevek is an Anarresti by birth, he travels to Urras in an attempt to develop his theory. He is not bound to one world, and because of this we are able to gain a more complete perspective of both worlds. While Urras allows him to develop his theory, it is only because the Urrasti value Shevek for what profit they may gain from his ideas (Le Guin 122). Urras engages him in a dialectical relationship with his other, but the Urrasti economy is based on supply and demand: an idea or product is only as valuable as what someone is willing to pay for it. Tim Libretti, author of "Dispossession and Disalienation: The Fulfillment of Life in Ursula Le Guin's The Dispossessed," examines how Ursula Le Guin critiques capitalism in "Why Americans are Afraid of Dragons." He says Le Guin analysis suggests that "the profit motive has become such a dominant cultural value and priority that it has led us to devalue and de-prioritize activities that are pleasurable and useful... but unprofitable" (Libretti 316). Urras is so focused upon profit and superiority that it loses an understanding of the people. The collective of Anarres is preferable to Urras, but this does not make it inherently better or more central. Shevek realizes the limitations of collectivism while on Urras and states "On Anarres, you see, we have cut ourselves off. We don't talk with other people, the rest of humanity" (Le Guin 304). Anarres' utopian valuation of centrality suggests the presence of something else being not-central and therefore inferior. His Theory of Simultaneity is an attempt to bridge the gap between understanding and time so that people could communicate not as fixed identities but in a dynamic dialectic. The spatial separation between Anarres and Urras mirrors the ideological gap between their sense-certainties of themselves, and if this gap is bridged the differences may cease to define identity.

The ansible will allow for a new method of communicating between Anarres, Urras and all other planets. His invention enables people to communicate immediately instead of in relation to where they are and where they are not. Even if they reside on separate planets light-years apart from each other, this invention will allow for them to speak instantaneously—their spatial division will not separate each other.
from speaking. This will not affect the fundamental relativity of language and does not lead to a temporally unified community. Tonia Payne writes about "nature writing" in her piece "Home is a Place Where You Have Never Been: Connections With the Other in Ursula Le Guin's Fiction," and she speaks to a kind of writing which seeks to draw together the self and other. She quotes Neil Evernden’s who notes “there is a metaphysic lying behind the simple existence of the word nature. It is not simply the description of a found relationship” (Evernden qtd. in Payne 190). Payne elaborates to explain that Evernden’s definition of nature is not limited to trees and animals in the biological sense; rather, nature writing is a process of relating to the “nonhuman” (Payne 190-191). The nonhuman appears to be that which foreign to self – the other. When the Anarresti organize their language based on the principles of centrality, they are creating an ideological space between what is considered central and what is decidedly not central and therefore not human: the Urrasti. However, the inherent notions of personal superiority in imagined communities and in the Anarresti’s perception of self are not absolute in the Platonic sense. They are not naturally better, so their valuation of foreign as less central is conventionally determined. However, they perceive themselves as superior through sense-certainty and this sense-certainty is enshrouded within the language they use to communicate. The ansible would allow people to communicate across the temporal gap between planets, allowing them to communicate in a dynamic mode over time, but it would not functionally transcend the static ideological value systems of superiority and centrality which are embedded in language.

Le Guin navigates the twin worlds of Urras and Anarres in order to understand how the ambiguous utopia of Anarres remains flawed in its relation to Urras. The Anarresti establish their planetary identity in terms of the planet which they originated: they are not people, they are community, they are not Urrasti, they are Anarresti, they are not the Moon, they are the Earth. Their ideals of centrality and community are just as flawed as the Urrasti’s valuation of profit and notions of superiority and inferiority. Instead of containing it to a single planet, however, this valuation takes place across two planets. They remain revolutionaries, which has no meaning except to establish them as revolting against
another society. Even though their community may be founded on principles of sharing, it still excludes other planets, which isolates them and arrests any hope of progress. Shevek’s Theory of Simultaneity would attempt to mend this isolation and help all societies communicate in a space that is not limited by time or space. This will not solve the problem of relativity – the Anarresti will still perceive the people who live on Urras as Urrasti and have a sense-certainty of themselves which is based on that relationship, but it is an attempt to transcend either/or notions of thinking. So long as the Anarresti identify the Urrasti as Urrasti, in relative to themselves, and take that apprehension as comprehension, the Anarresti will never be able to achieve an understanding of Urrasti society except through its position to themselves. They will only be able to understand themselves as what they are not. Language is a tool which the Anarresti use to communicate across temporal spaces, but the relativity of language creates static notions of identity which inhibit the two planets from entering into dialectic with each other because they have a false-certainty of themselves and the other which inhibits the struggle for personal identity.

These findings are particularly relevant in relation to the time period in which the piece was written; it's historical context reveals The Dispossessed as a meta-text which points towards similar tribulations within the modern world. The book was published in 1976 during the Cold War when tensions between the capitalist countries of the world and the communist countries were in a stalemate. This is a direct parallel to Anarres and Urras, and the problems of perceptual utopia and sense-certainty extend to the politics of the time period. The Dispossessed is very much a criticism of the perception of nation as a central point of understanding; so long as the other is perceived as communist, capitalist or whatever other socially determined convention, understanding within the dialectic will be inhibited. Tony Burns, author of Political Theory, Science Fiction, and Utopian Literature: Ursula K. Le Guin and The Dispossessed, makes a claim for the distinction of a literary utopia and a utopian novel. A literary utopia is a "visionary" utopia, one that argues for an ideological perspective of how society should be (Burns 119). A utopian novel, however, is a novel whose main theme the dynamics between notions of utopia and dystopia (Burns 115). Le Guin’s novel is not presenting an argument for the valuation of communism
or capitalism; rather, in her novel she is elaborating upon the relationship between one ideal utopia and another. Instead of addressing the utopian societies as relatively good or bad, Le Guin is navigating between the utopias of Anarres and Urras in order to criticize the risk of exclusion that utopia is blind to.

Utopia is the conception an individual will have of his social identity under self-certainty: because there is only the apprehension of the other as it appears, a self will never have its perceptions of the world challenged. It will be a being-for-self which does not recognize the other as alternative but as inferior. A sense-certainty of other as communist or capitalist or any other conventionally determined term of identity runs the risk of halting any possibility of dialectic and, therefore, progress.

Works Cited


