

Was Ursula Le Guin a Socialist?

A Review of No Time to Spare

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From 2010 to her death in 2018, Ursula Le Guin composed blog posts for her website and a selection of these have been collected into a wonderful book, *No Time to Spare*. Many of the essays are beautiful accounts of moments in her life, with, for example, a most intense appreciation of the art of eating a soft-boiled egg for breakfast that serves as a lesson in mindfulness. Here, though, I want to focus on the political ideas of Le Guin that are explicit and implicit in many of the features.

In one essay where she addresses the question of socialism directly, Le Guin does so in the context of a comment about the alternatives to capitalism:

Some of the alternatives that existed in the past had promise; I think socialism did, and still does, but it was run off the rails by ambitious men using it as a means to power, and by the infection of capitalism — the obsession with growing bigger at all cost in order to defeat rivals and dominate the world.

Ursula Le Guin on socialism, from *No Time to Spare*

In this one, short paragraph are four hugely important ideas. Firstly, that socialism still has the potential to provide an alternative to capitalism. Second and third, that the reasons previous efforts to create socialism have failed are a) the desire for power and b) the infection of global capitalism. Fourthly, the gender of those who ran socialism off the rails was male.

Of these ideas the first is essential. Almost certainly the majority of people living on the planet right now would agree that the current economic system is deeply flawed. Hardly anyone, however, can agree on what the alternative should be. And this is largely due to the fact that socialism has been discredited. Yet unless the idea of socialism is revived our species is in great trouble, because anything other than a fundamental, radical, reorganisation of the world by workers will succumb to the pressures of trying to co-exist with capitalism.

The second, that it was the seduction of power that wrecked previous socialist projects, is entirely consistent with Le Guin's core political beliefs, which were those of anarchism. Ursula Le Guin was always wary of defining herself politically, not through fear of alienating people by sounding too radical, but because she felt she lacked the expertise and devotion to activism to be a political authority. Her main passion and her decades of experience were in writing, both in composing beautiful works but also teaching and analysing literature.

The setting for one of Le Guin's early novels, *The Dispossessed*, is that of a utopian world. In order to research that world, Le Guin read widely into anarchism: especially Kropotkin and a modern anarchist thinker, Murray Bookchin.

And it was the pacifist, rather than destructive, element within anarchism that appealed to Le Guin the most, as she explained in an interview.

I felt totally at home with (pacifist, not violent) anarchism, just as I always had with Taoism (they are related, at least by affinity.) It is the only mode of political thinking that I do feel at home with. It also links up more and more interestingly, these days, with behavioral biology and animal psychology (as Kropotkin knew it would.)

In *Jacobin's* obituary of Le Guin, the novelist is described as being a historical materialist but this is too much of a stretch. An anarchist emphasis on the importance of power in politics is very clear in Le Guin's thought. Even here, in this discussion about whether Le Guin was a socialist,

it's no accident that she puts the issue of power before the question of structure in signalling what went wrong for socialism in the past.

As an aside, many on the left interested in Science Fiction and Fantasy juxtapose the work of Le Guin, radical, feminist, anarchist and Tolkien, who they see as conservative and anti-working class. China Mieville, whose critique of Tolkien derives from the essay of another anarchist fantasy writer, Michael Moorcock, has been the standard bearer for this approach.

In my view, it is utterly mistaken. Le Guin herself was a huge champion of Tolkien and often spoke up for the literary merits of *The Lord of the Rings*, a book that despite enormous public enthusiasm, is usually under-appreciated by critics. And in *The Lord of the Rings* is a metaphor for the corrupting influence of power that is as pure as any in literature. The One Ring is the ultimate test of character and only those wise enough to reject it have any integrity, those who try to use it are doomed to become hollowed-out husks of their former selves.

Having placed an emphasis on the question of the destructive effects of the possession of power, which remains an important issue for the left, Le Guin also sees global capitalism as a key contributor to the failure of previous attempts to create socialism. This is a vital observation for the future too. Any attempt to introduce socialism in one jurisdiction is doomed: either pressure to compete in the world market or direct overthrow will end the effort. Fortunately, today, our world is so integrated globally that a socialist movement that really went down to alter the fundamentals of society would have an immediate and massive international impact, making it much more likely to transform the entire planet.

In unpacking Le Guin's observation on the previous failure of socialism, one more point remains to be made, which is that she highlighted the fact that it was men who led the movement away from utopia. This is an historical observation as well as a reflection on Le Guin's 'steady, resolute, morally committed' role in the feminist movement. She explicitly defined herself as a part of second wave feminism — the struggles of the late 1960s and early 1970s — and her writings throughout her entire life, both fictional and non-fictional, constantly returned to the subject of gender inequality.

It seems to me to be clear that Ursula Le Guin was very sympathetic to all alternatives to capitalism and while more inclined to describe herself as anarchist was definitely open to being persuaded about socialism. The revolutions and socialist movements she saw in her lifetime did not, however, provide a lot of evidence for the potential of socialism to deliver utopia. Personally, I think that potential is evident in all the great working class uprisings of the twentieth century, but you have to really drill down to the detail of the particular variants of socialism active in them to understand why, ultimately, none of them led to the disappearance of capitalism in favour of a sharing society.

Ursula Le Guin on dialectics and Taosim

In *No Time to Spare* there is another subject that connects Le Guin's intellectual makeup to socialism and it is the question of dialectics. For socialists, to be able to analyse political systems that are in motion and which can dramatically hit transformative tipping points is essential and the tool for doing this, dialectics, comes to us from a western tradition, originating with the early Greek philosophers and being developed especially by Hegel and Marx. But there is an even older tradition of dialectical thought rooted in ancient eastern societies.

When Le Guin wanted to explain some underlying connections between utopian and dystopian societies in literature, she first needed her readers to understand dialectics and she helped them do so by drawing on her deep engagement with Taoism. An interpreter of Lao Tzu's sixth century BC *Tao Te Ching*, Le Guin used the yang-yin symbol to illustrate her point that every utopia contains a dystopia, every dystopia a utopia.

In the yang-yin symbol each half contains within it a portion of the other, signifying their complete interdependence and continual intermutability. The figure is static, but each half contains the seed of transformation. The symbol presents not a stasis but a process.

In the many appreciations of Ursula Le Guin that have been written since her death (22 January 2018) this aspect to her thinking has usually been neglected, yet in my view it is fundamental to her thought.

The presence of a powerful and playful mind is evident throughout *No Time to Spare* and always Le Guin's writing is informed by a sense of development and change, even in her own sentences as she formulates them. That's why they are rich, truthful, convincing. When reading Le Guin, you feel the presence of someone who is not satisfied until she has expressed herself exactly as she intends. Someone who weighs the meaning of every word, every punctuation mark even.

Le Guin's dialectical way of approaching any subject, even that of the behaviour of cats (she was a great cat lover and if you are the same, you'll read some of these essays with enormous pleasure) means we never get a dry, linear, didactic essay. Always, they are rich, fecund and humorous.

Was Ursula Le Guin a socialist? She was. And she wasn't.

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