

Living in a Marxist Sci-Fi World: A Phenomenological Analysis of the Power of Science Fiction.

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Abstract

The state of our current world has brought about a very active discussion concerning possible alternatives to our current society. In this article, I wish to consider Marx's idea of communism as a possible alternative, by understanding it as an undetermined concept that only proposes a society without classes and private property. The thesis I will defend here is that we can meaningfully think about such an alternative through the means of Science Fiction literature. In particular, I will take Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (2006) as a case study. To clarify this relation between science fiction (SF) literature and communism as a particular case of an alternative society, I will introduce some concepts of Edmund Husserl's phenomenological theory. Thus, I shall argue that in SF we can presentify in bounded phantasy an alternative life-world, so furnishing with content the undetermined idea, and in doing so, strengthen the belief in the possibility of such an alternative society.

*Imagination proves to be the necessary condition
of every attempt to bring about changes in the real world.*

Aron Gurwitsch, *Edmund Husserl's Conception of Phenomenological Psychology*, p. 720

The issue of an alternative to our current society is nowadays a very present and pressing matter. While there are many ways to approach it, science fiction (from now on, SF) literature has explored different types of dystopias and utopias as possible forms of alternative societies. Even though these novels do not always aim to present a literally attainable society, fiction itself offers a kind of experience that is not to be found in writings of another nature, such as treatises or papers. In this paper, I wish to analyze the experience of readers that engage with those novels that propose alternative societies. I will employ to this purpose Edmund Husserl's phenomenological theory, and I will focus my analysis on one case-study: Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (2006). The novel portrays two planets that orbit their star together:

Urras, a world quite similar to our own, where a capitalist society, with all its known problems, coexists with a USSR kind of society. The other, Anarres, is Le Guin's presentation of an alternative society under the guise of an anarcho-communist social organization.

Even though Le Guin's more or less explicit sources of inspiration are to be found in the anarchist movement—especially in the figure of Peter Kropotkin—and in taoism, I understand her alternative society to be a fictional realization of Karl Marx's idea of communism. I will not engage here in discussions about capitalism, but will rather take Marx's critique as a starting point: capitalism, as any system based on classes, exploitation and oppression, must be overcome if we are to live as equal and free beings. The overcoming of capitalism was postulated by Marx as a next step in history, one that we had to fight for to achieve. He named this next stage "communism" and described it as a society without classes and without private property. Nevertheless, Marx did not describe any further how this society would or should be.

I will proceed as follows: in the first section I will introduce Husserl's phenomenological theory, to make the relevant concepts available to the reader. In the second section I shall discuss Marx's idea of communism, by offering some very brief and general introduction of it, and by proposing a specific way of understanding it, namely, as an undetermined concept. Finally, in the third section, I will move into the case-study of *The Dispossessed*, to show how it presentifies in phantasy¹ a communist life-world. The purpose of this paper is, thus, to argue *through* phenomenology *that* SF literature is a very powerful tool *to* think about communism as the alternative to our current society. The aim is thus double: first, to offer the phenomenological description of the experience of reading SF in which alternative societies are presented and, second, to show that Marx's undetermined idea of communism is presentified in Le Guin's work and can therefore be considered a viable alternative to our society.

1. An Introduction to some Conceptual Tools of Phenomenology

Husserlian phenomenology is in itself a theory and a method. It claims to be a *radical* philosophy (Husserl 1991, 48), in the sense that it sets out into the path of philosophy without taking anything for granted, without accepting any presupposition, be it from the pre-theoretical life or from the existing sciences and theories. The so-called *epoché* demands that we suspend the general thesis of the reality of the world (1976, 63), that is, that we begin our analysis without taking position regarding its existence and that we perform a *reduction* to the sphere of our consciousness and experiences. The *principle of all principles* (51) demands that we abstain from regarding anything as true, unless we can bring it to original *givenness*. What that means is that for each

region of being there is a corresponding way of givenness that grants us access to the corresponding objects as they are. The clearest cases are sensory perception for the material world and immanent perception (reflection) for acts of consciousness. Meaning, that a material object is originally (truly, really) given to us, when we perceive it; a “mental object” (*Erlebnis*), like an act or the correlate of an act as such, is originally given to us through an act of reflection. Phenomenology is transcendental in the sense that it holds the world and its objects to be *constituted* by consciousness. In summary, everything that is, is the result of a sense-giving activity of the I based on something given, where the transcendent world plays the role of the guiding thread.

1.1 Perception, Presentification and Phantasy.

The first conceptual distinction I wish to introduce, to help us in our analysis, is that between *empty* and *fulfilled* intentions or propositions: when I am intentionally directed to an absent object or state of affairs, that is, one for which I do not have an intuition in the corresponding form, that intention is said to be empty. When the object or state of affairs is given to me in the appropriate form of intuition, that intention is thus fulfilled.

Not all intentions are to be fulfilled by perception. There is a different class of acts that can operate as fulfilling-acts: presentifications. So, the second distinction to be introduced:

- *Perception (Wahrnehmung)*: is the “mother-form” of acts. In perception an object is given “in person,” “in the flesh” (*leibhaft*), ordinary and present. This does *not* mean that it is given to me adequately or fully.
- *Presentification (Vergegenwärtigung)*: is the act in which an object is given, but not presently, not in person (like in perception). Examples here are: recollection (memory), phantasy, imagination, empathy.².

The form of presentification that will be of relevance for the following analysis is phantasy. In phantasy, we can think about anything in the mode of the “as if,” without attending to actuality or, in Husserl’s terminology, in quasi-actuality. We can intend without commitment to reality or truth, in what we call the *neutrality modification*: thinking about something without positing its existence or truth, without judging if it is or isn’t, just quasi-positing. It serves, as Husserl claims, as a form of clarification or making something evident:

Here [in the quasi-actuality of phantasy] belongs what we normally call clarification, bringing to clarity, it designates always a mode of making [something] evident, of staging a synthetic way [that goes] from an unclear intention to the corresponding prefigurative [*vorverbildlichenden*] intuition;

namely one that implicitly carries within itself the sense: if it happened as a direct, self-giving [intention], it would fulfill the intention in its being, verifying it. The prefigurative intuition of this verifying fulfillment does not produce actualizing evidence of being, but it does [produce evidence] of the *possibility* of being of the corresponding content. (Husserl 1991, 94)³

As an example, think of how a complex experiment is designed: a series of initial conditions must be given, a procedure described, arriving to propositions of the form "if, under the circumstances, this and that were to obtain, then we would know that..." and so on. In phantasy we build up these prefigurative intuitions that, based on things we already know, enable us to think about things we do not yet know. We can contemplate possibilities, necessities and impossibilities in pure phantasy, and move to perception to find out what actually is the case. While phantasy alone cannot elicit knowledge about the actual world, it is the source of knowledge for *possibilities* of the actual world.

Phantasy can be "free" or "unrestricted," or it can also be *bound* phantasy. Even though free phantasy will always be restricted by our mental capacities, it extends well beyond the limits of the world as we know it. I can, for instance, phantasize about a planet or universe, where gravity does not apply. I picture in my mind pigs floating, while leaves fall and stones swirl in between. If I were to do that with theoretical purposes, I would soon arrive at the conclusion that "it cannot possibly be the case." But one could write a nice story about such a place; nothing prevents us from entertaining these thoughts or images in our phantasy⁴. A bound phantasy, on the other hand, is one that sets out to think, imagine or contemplate states of affairs that are *possible* according to the laws of a given domain. The previous example contravenes our knowledge of physics, but the notions of a space elevator or a Dyson sphere, although today technologically impossible, seem to be products of phantasy that respects the laws of physics (at least, we have not yet found concluding reasons to deem them impossible)⁵. Regarding this distinction, Husserl claims:

If I have a pure phantasy, then I can make a supposition [*Ansatz*]. I think to myself, that would be real. I can then think hypothetically, keep thinking, extract necessary consequences, etc. But still, I would not have any relation to reality. I do not simply dream, but I think that the dreamed world would be a reality, and it pertains to it, that I hold fast to the dreamed, that I come back to the same thing and that I hold it fast in its identical sense. (2009, 211)

This supposition one makes is precisely that our phantasy "could be real." The movement from free phantasy to bound phantasy consists in binding the original phantasy to known elements of a specific part of the world, in order to determine their possibility. This, as we said, does not guarantee any actual relation to reality,

since for that we need more than phantasy (we need the corresponding acts that give us the objects of the region in question); but it does bind us to the real, in the sense of continuing the phantasy according to the laws and principles of the region in question, and thus it offers the opportunity of considering the possibilities and necessities contained in it. In this sense, Moylan's description of one of the features of the so-called genre of *critical Utopia* (a genre under which *The Dispossessed* falls), recognizes this property of boundedness:

Opposed to other fantastic forms, utopias and science fiction practice an estrangement that is cognitively consistent with nature as it is known or with the imagined natural laws in the particular text. That is, the estranged world of utopia must appear realistic, must not partake of the impossibilities of the supernatural or the naturally undoable. This textual game depends on the author's rhetorical ability to create a mode of discourse which allows her or him to exaggerate, intensify, and extend scientific, technological, and social conditions to their most extreme point while convincing the reader that everything which occurs in the fantasy world is feasible. (Moylan 2014, 33)

1.2 The Life-World

The last concept I wish to introduce for our analysis is that of the *life-world*. Every experience we have is always surrounded by a horizon of undetermined determinability (Husserl 1976, 57), meaning: while I am directing my attention to a specific object in my surroundings, other objects are there for me not being presently thematized, but susceptible of receiving my full attention if I turn it to them. In this way, the undetermined objects in my experience can always be further determined through further experiences. The world is said to be the horizon of all horizons, the all-encompassing horizon. Somewhere "between" the immediate horizon of a concrete experience and the ultimate horizon of the world, we find the life-world as our home-world (*Heimwelt*)⁶. On the other hand, the life-world is our ground, foundation for all experiences:

The life-world is [...] for us, the ones who live in it awake, always for us there, being for us in advance, "ground" for all praxis, be it theoretic or non-theoretic. (1976b, 145)

We learn and acquire our constitutions and senses from our life-world, from our practical relation to what is out there for us. In this sense, it serves not only as encompassing horizon, but also as foundation for our habits, understanding and beliefs. It is also "a kingdom of originary evidence" (130), upon which the evidences of our perceptions, memories, presentifications, verifications, inductions are grounded.

Even though the life-world “has in all its relativities a general structure,” one “upon which all that is relative is bound,” but “it’s not itself relative” (142), there are different life-worlds, for example, for different cultures:

But when we end up in a foreign surrounding, with the Negroes in Congo or the Chinese peasants, etc., then we hit upon the fact, that their truths, the facts that stand for them certain and verified or to be verified, are by no means our own. (141)

The life-world, then, as ground of our experience, is the complex whole of senses, meanings, beliefs, habits, relations, possibilities and goals we acquire, that serve as a basis for our life. From another perspective, these elements do not only introduce us into the world, but also remain there through our entire lives as a frame, as a horizon for all of our experiences. The life-world as such has its own ontological structure, independent of any concrete case. As part of that invariant structure, individuality appears: it is an essential trait of the life-world to manifest itself in concrete forms, according to different factors, resulting so in different life-worlds. Thus, we can speak of the life-world as being one and the same for all humans, while at the same time acknowledging that each culture, at each time in human history, has lived in a different life-world ⁷.

What we want to analyze in this context is precisely the relation between phantasy and life-worlds. On the one hand, all that we phantasize is bound by our experience, that has its roots in the ground of the real, actual life-world ⁸. Even in my wildest phantasies I see colors and shapes, objects and events, there are language and concepts, etc. All that I can phantasize is, to some extent, an object of possible experience: because I am experiencing it through phantasy. Now, if I bind my phantasy through specific known empirical laws, I can try to phantasize about actualizable possibilities, that may in due course prove themselves as more than possibility, or as impossible.

When the product of our phantasy is a whole fictional world, a whole society, the question about its possibility is harder. But to answer this question is not impossible. There are also laws that bind us: historical, sociological, biological, economical, anthropological, etc. Even if each has a different status as a law, one can strive to be bound by them in phantasy and try to build a coherent world (like so many SF authors do so well). A successful phantasy about a world based on certain theoretical ideas (i.e. Marx’s communism) can strengthen the belief in the possibility of these ideas and also increase their desirability.

2. The Marxist Idea of Communism

Marx dedicated most of his writing to an economic-political critique of human history, focusing especially on its present stage of capitalism. Through his dialectics, he showed how “the history of all societies until now is the history of class-struggle” (Marx and Engels 1977, 462), a struggle that developed from the opposition between slaves and masters, through that of lords and peasants, all the way to the present-day bourgeois and proletarians.

As it is well known, Marx’s critique of capitalism does not end with the description of the current system, but moves on into a proposal/predictive phase: the revolution would take history to its next stage, a social organization which would no longer be based on relations of exploitation and oppression, which he called “communism.” Even though both he and Engels elaborated with some detail how this revolution would occur and what the so called “dictatorship of the proletariat” should aim to do once in power to reach communism, the concrete content of communism itself was left rather unattended. It is indeed quite hard to find explicit statements about the future communist society in the 43 volumes of the Marx and Engels complete works. In *The Communist Manifesto*, the authors claim: “In this sense, the communists can summarize their theory with one expression: abolition of private property” (475). It is important to point out that the sense of “private property” meant here concerns primarily, if not exclusively, the property of the means of production and not, say, your toothbrush or shoes. What defines the communist society as such, is the fact that no one owns the means of production and the resources themselves. What happens to other forms of property remains an open issue to be discussed in a more advanced phase of communism-planning ⁹.

Engels answers the question, “Of what kind must this new social order be?” thus:

Above all, it will take the work of the industry and all branches of production in general from the hands of the particular individuals, who create competition, and for that purpose it will let all these branches of production be operated *by the whole of society*, that is, for common calculation, according to common plan and under participation of all members of society. It will, therefore, *abolish the competition and place the association* in its stead. [...] Precisely the private property will have to be eliminated, and in its place will enter the common use of all instruments of production and the distribution of all products according to common agreement, or the so called community of goods. (Engels 1977, 370; my emphasis.)

As we can see then, the abolition of private property would entail that of classes and exploitation, turning production, the whole of economy, into a decision of the whole of society, that shall proceed in such a way that shall bring about the principle of: “each according to her capacities, for each according to her necessities!” (Marx 1987, 21). In a more philosophical than economical note, Marx claims:

Communism [is understood] as the positive transcendence [Aufhebung] of private property as human self-alienation and for that reason as real acquisition of the human essence through and for the humans; because of that, as a complete return of the human being for themselves as a social, that is, a humane human being—a return that came to be consciously and within the total richness of the present development. This communism is as an accomplished naturalism = humanism, as an accomplished humanism = naturalism; it is the true dissolution of the conflict between the human being with Nature and with the human being; the true dissolution of the fight between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between individual and species. It is the dissolved riddle of History and knows itself as this solution. (Marx 1968b, 536)

From the sharp critique of the capitalist society follows a clear conclusion: it is from the relations of exploitation based on private property that basically most, if not all, of the social evils and injustices plaguing our society stem. Therefore, it is only logical that drastically changing these foundations would bring about an entirely new society, where these contradictions are finally resolved, or dissolved. This, of course, does not mean that new contradictions (or “problems”) will not arise. We do not know that, but at least *these*—i.e., the ones we know today in our current society—would be transcended.

Communism was, then, proposed to be a society with no classes and no private property. As to what that means, how we can further determine this notion, we can extract the following tenets from the previous quotations, that will serve in our analysis of Le Guin’s book:

- Administration of resources, industry, production by the whole of society, with active participation of its members (instead of particular individuals).
- Association or cooperation instead of competition.
- Community of goods: common use of all instruments and products, according to common agreement.
- Capacities and necessities as criteria for distribution of goods and division of labor.

- Transcendence of self-alienation and existential contradictions of the human beings amongst themselves and towards nature.

There is also a very good reason why Marx was not more explicit about how a communist society would be like: we do not know, and we cannot possibly know *a priori*. Our society is the product of history and of the material conditions of production; the future society shall be the product of future material conditions and the history that leads to it. Until they are realized, any claim about that society will be no more than speculation—an exercise which Marx, in his scientific attitude, always abstained from.

Marx and his followers had their reasons not to speculate or describe how a communist society would be in its concrete determination. That does not mean, that we cannot consider *possible* realizations of that very undetermined and empty idea of a society without classes, state, exploitation, oppression, private property, and existential contradictions. I believe that Anarres, Le Guin's anarcho-communist society, is one such realization of these undetermined concepts.

3. Science Fiction and Communism through Phenomenology: *The Dispossessed*

I *do not* wish to claim that Le Guin specifically set herself to illustrate Marx's communism. Her known influences in this matter are rather Kropotkin (1902) and taoism¹⁰. The history of the relation between the movements of anarchism and communism is a matter of its own, and I do not wish to engage with it here. Suffice it to say, there undoubtedly is a compatible version of them: anarcho-communism. While Le Guin might have taken her inspiration from multiple sources, I find that her novel portrays enough elements of communism à la Marx, and these I intend to show in the following.

I will continue by advancing my general thesis: I believe *The Dispossessed*—as the chosen example amongst others—has the power to let its readers presentify in phantasy Marx's idea of a communist society, especially in that it creates a life-world where these ideas are realized: the truths upon which the Anarresti stand are by no means our own. If Marx's idea of communism is, as I claimed, an *undetermined* one, then Le Guin's work is one possible determination of it. This is not to say that this Anarresti society is *the* one and only determination, but through it, I claim, we gain insight as to the possibility of communism in general.

Not only that, but in fiction we gain more than conceptual content. One could theorize and offer different "models" of societies that would satisfy the idea of communism, and even furnish them with very specific degrees of content. The difference is, precisely, that the contents we gain in fiction are not only of an

“intellectual” nature, but are lively contents. We get to stand in the shoes of an individual who lives in such a society and, even more, that looks at one like our own with his own eyes. This gives us the possibility, even if only in phantasy, of dwelling in such a world. A helpful comparison for a very similar idea could be the difference between a history textbook and a historical novel. While the former is usually more accurate and intellectually informative, the latter has the power of putting us in the time and place, and gives us a glimpse into life as it was then.

The whole capitalist society, especially considering globalization, can be considered as a unitary life-world, in that enough common elements are present¹¹. For this reason, I find the creation of this anarcho-communist life-world so powerful: it presents a completely different “ground” upon which our basic intuitions, constitutions, common sense, praxis and the source of our evidence stand. That which is “obvious,” undoubted and self-evident on Anarres are totally different principles than our own, the horizons under which we live are completely different from the Anarresti.

Let us dive into the case-analysis by reconstructing the setting: Urras, the mother planet, offered their revolutionary “Odonians” (named after Odo, the woman who led them) the barren moon, Anarres, to inhabit, in exchange for never returning and cutting all sorts of communications, except for some basic exchange of goods. The novel begins some two hundred years after this, when the Odonian society is already running under the principles of anarcho-communism. Our main character, Shevek, a physicist who amongst others on Anarres begins to question some of the “new” problems that appear, embarks himself in a journey to the mother planet, where he faces for the first time, in person, capitalism and the state. Shevek’s knowledge of Urras and, therefore, of capitalism and state-societies, has been up to that point empty knowledge. It is through his experience in Urras that he fulfills those intentions and gains intuitive knowledge of what is like to live in such a society. Shevek gets to experience a capitalist society like our own as an anarcho-communist, while we, capitalist citizens, catch a glimpse of anarcho-communism on Shevek’s Anarres.

The following passage is taken from a scene in which Shevek, during his stay in Urras, is dining at the house of a colleague, Oiie, with his wife and children. Shevek is confronted by some of the usual questions a capitalist citizen might have, and Shevek addresses them all with the spontaneity of someone who comes from another world. I will quote *in extenso*, but offer my comments in between:

“But what,” Oiie said abruptly, as if the question, long kept back, burst from him under pressure, “what keeps people in order? Why don’t they rob and murder each other?”

“Nobody owns anything to rob. If you want things you take them from the depository. As for violence, well, I don’t know, Oiie; would you murder me, ordinarily? And if you felt like it, would a law against it stop you? Coercion is the least efficient means of obtaining order.” (Le Guin 2006, 126)

Here we find quite a clear affirmation of the anarcho-communist character of Anarres: no property and no laws. “Nobody owns anything” seems quite a clear example of the “community of goods” we found in the previous quotation from Engels. On Anarres, goods are readily available to all its citizens. While people might hold possession of things such as clothing items, tools or even jewelry (273), everything one might need lays at their disposal, rendering the idea of theft itself nonsensical. While the absence of laws is an explicitly anarchist element and not technically a Marxist one, the way in which Shevek considers the question itself is quite in line with Marx’s notion of contradictions being solved, the “fight between necessity and freedom” disappearing altogether. Anarchism and communism go hand in hand on Anarres: in a socialized economy, there is no place for coercion.

Oiie hits again:

“All right, but how do you get people to do the dirty work?”

“What dirty work?” asked Oiie’s wife, not following.

“Garbage collecting, grave digging,” Oiie said; Shevek added, “Mercury mining,” and nearly said, “Shit processing,” but recollected the Ioti taboo on scatological words. He had reflected, quite early in his stay on Urras, that the Urrasti lived among mountains of excrement, but never mentioned shit. (126)

Before getting to the most-important Anarresti socio-economical organization, the scatological taboo deserves some mention. It would be far-fetched to claim that such a taboo only exists within an oppressive society (like capitalism) and that it would automatically disappear in anarcho-communism. Yet, so was the case for Anarres. While this might not be necessary, the author explores this “higher-order” element of the Anarresti life-world, as a society which, in general, does not have many taboos. It is a society without written laws, a society without prohibitions and, in this sense, not having such taboos seems a logical element: no one prohibits anybody else of discussing any topic or mentioning certain things. On the other hand, it is also a society without hierarchy and that, maybe, can also be seen in the Anarresti “metaphysics”: there is no scale of being, with God on the top and feces at the very bottom.

Back to Shevek:

“Well, we all do them. But nobody has to do them for very long, unless he likes the work. One day in each decad [a ten-day week] the community management committee or the block committee or whoever needs you can ask you to join in such work, they make rotating lists. Then the disagreeable work posting, or dangerous ones like the mercury mines and mills, normally they’re for one half year only.”

“But then the whole personnel must consist of people just learning the job.”

“Yes. It’s not efficient, but what else is to be done? You can’t tell a man to work on a job that will cripple him or kill him in a few years. Why should he do that?”

“He can refuse the order?”

“It’s not an order, Oiie. He goes to Divlab —the Division of Labor office— and says, I want to do such and such, what have you got? And they tell him where there are jobs.” (126)

In this last part of the passage we learn some basic elements of Anarresti life and especially of their socio-economical organization. A typical question is, then, who does that, which no one wants to do? While the answer to that question in a capitalist society like our own is simply “the dispossessed,” the proletarians, those who have to choose between that and nothing, the Anarresti common sense and economical system is quite different: *everyone*. In a similar way as it might happen in a private household amongst a family or room-mates, where cleaning duties and other house-maintenance tasks might be equally distributed among the residents, the whole of Anarres works that way: people have their “primary job,” that which they chose to do, and rotational duties to cover the necessary work for the whole of society, from which everybody benefits, and which everybody decides as necessary. If we take into consideration that there is, indeed, no money, no market and that all necessary goods are readily available, we can see how this society is indeed an example of communism. If we add that there is no state and no police, no form of control through violence, we see, again, the realization of anarchism as a form of social organization¹².

Two of the “communist” determinations we extracted from Marx and Engels are crystallized in this passage alone: there is no competition, mainly, because there is nothing to compete for. Instead, the organization relies on the principle of association or cooperation: necessary work is done by everyone, rotating the jobs that nobody takes as a primary job. This is done, evidently, according to necessity, but also to capacity (this being the second element): it is not only that necessary jobs are divided amongst all members of society, but also that each member gets to choose which necessary task she will perform, according to her capacities.

One more question from Oiie:

“But then why do people do the dirty work at all? Why do they even accept the one-day-in-ten jobs?”

“Because they are done together... And other reasons. You know, life on Anarres isn't rich, as it is here. In the little communities there isn't very much entertainment, and there is a lot of work to be done. So, if you work at a mechanical loom mostly, every tenth day it's pleasant to go outside and lay a pipe or plow a field, with a different group of people... And then there is challenge. Here you think that the incentive to work is finances, need for money or desire for profit, but where there's no money the real motives are clearer, maybe. People like to do things. They like to do them well. People take the dangerous, hard jobs because they take pride in doing them, they can—egoize, we call it—show off?—to the weaker ones. Hey, look, little boys, see how strong I am! You know? A person likes to do what he is good at doing... But really, it is the question of ends and means. After all, work is done for the work's sake. It is the lasting pleasure of life. The private conscience knows that. And also the social conscience, the opinion of one's neighbors. There is no other reward, on Anarres, no other law. One's own pleasure, and the respect of one's fellows. That is all. When that is so, then you see the opinion of the neighbors becomes a very mighty force.” (127)

Oiie's question is quite thorny and Shevek's answer only a possible one amongst many. This why-question reveals indeed a deep tension between both world-views, between both of the life-worlds from which the characters come. Shevek could have answered: “Well, because they do... that's just the way it is,” or: “Because it is the only way to guarantee freedom and equality, which are humanity's basic principles of social organization.” He could have also said something like: “Why, you see Oiie, when you grow up, you will learn that in life you have to do things you don't really like, so as to get to enjoy other things you do like.” While, if we asked Oiie, why do only *some* people take care of the “dirty jobs” in archic-capitalism, the answer could be: “Because that's the way it is,” or: “Because otherwise nobody would do these jobs”; “Because they are forced to by necessity and coercion.” What this tension reveals is precisely the underlying constitutive elements of the opposing life-worlds: the anarcho-communist principles of economic equality and political freedom, against the archic-capitalist ones of class-belonging and political coercion. For both cases, these differences are given, and their reason for being goes beyond the rational reconstruction that a given member of the corresponding society could give.

In the last passage we also learn about another fundamental element of the Anarresti society. Le Guin takes the idea of a revolutionary society to be a society in

permanent revolution, always changing and perfecting itself. That is one of the main themes of the novel. In this case, the new contradictions the revolutionary main characters face concern how the opinion of the others has come to play the role of “replacing” the state and its laws¹³. There is, strictly speaking, no coercion, no obligation, but the way in which you are judged by your peers and fellow citizens does play indeed a determining role for the behavior of the individual. As it happens in our society with “customs” and the so called “unwritten laws,” social order is maintained to a great extent through the active control of its citizens and not much more than denunciation and condemnation of not acceptable behavior. The role that social morality plays on Anarres and on our current Earth are, of course, very different. While for us it would not amount to a decisive factor at the level of social theory or political thinking, the absence of any other form of coercion or oppression on Anarres makes these invisible laws, this incipient stagnant bureaucracy, a locus of contradiction and conflict with personal freedom. Even though the freedom that the Anarresti experience is much greater than our own, these new conflicts go to show that humanity’s ideal of total freedom is not yet fully realized.

This social organization has its corresponding ideological elements. Or, in our phenomenological terms, we have certain acquired beliefs that make up the ground upon which the Anarresti stand, the obvious, indubitable truths that shape our understanding of reality itself, and social reality in particular, which are learned by every Anarresti. These, in turn, operate not only as ground, but also as horizon for everyday experience and, ultimately, also play a defining role in determining the objectives and ideals of the members of society. Let us take a close look to three Odonian maxims or *mottos*, taken from Odo’s fictitious writings, that stem from the “revolutionary time” (before the Odonian left Urras for Anarres) and that clearly reflect a sort of dialectical thinking, in the sense that they are responses or interpellations to an archist, capitalist society:

“To make a thief, make an owner; to create crime, create laws. *The Social Organism*.” (Le Guin 2006, 118)

This first motto has a different meaning for Odo as it has for her successful followers. To her, it is the answer to the state of affairs she has before her. It is something that we might say today in the face of our current society: it is, indeed, the state and the capital that create crime and criminals. The capital pushes people to the extreme through inequality and then the state, as an oppressive institution, prosecutes the victims of the system by means of effective violence. But what meaning could this statement have for the Anarresti themselves, who have no experience of crime nor state nor property and yet have memorized these words? It is, for them, clearly an empty proposition. Still, it serves as a founding base that gives meaning to

their own social organization: we do it this way, because otherwise we would not have freedom and equality. State and capital are absent enemies, threats, that loom about, across the abyss of space. This maxim, then, serves the purpose of justifying their own social order as the best possible, although still *in opposition to* the previous system of archist capitalism. While the motto itself seems to suggest primarily that one can only steal if things are owned by someone else, there is another meaning present: *owning is stealing*. This strong and fundamental opposition to private property is a paradigmatic element of the Marxist understanding of communism, it is the abolition of private property itself what defines the passage to a communist society.

At another level, the reminiscence of archist capitalism still remains as a present horizon within Anarresti society. Words such as “profiteer” and “propertarian” are used as insults, in a general and unrelated manner, or to point out specific egoistic or possessive behavior. I mentioned that a trade agreement of sorts still exists between both planets, which is a matter of concern for many: “Every generation, every year, in the PDC [Production and Distribution Committee] debates of Abbenay [Anarres’ capital city], fierce protests were made: ‘Why do we continue these *profiteering* business transactions with warmaking *propertarians*?’” (Le Guin 79, my emphasis). This reference to Urras as an evil place is an ever-present horizon for the Anarresti. On the one hand, because they came from Urras, on the other, because Urras is still there. The meaning of this horizon is very well represented in the following passage, where Shevek has the opportunity, for the first time during his stay on Urras, to talk to a member of the working class:

The conversation went on. It was difficult for Shevek to follow, both in language and in substance. He was being told about things he had no experience of at all. He had never seen a rat, or an army barracks, or an insane asylum, or a poorhouse, or a pawnshop, or an execution, or a thief, or a tenement, or a rent collector, or a man who wanted to work and could not find work to do, or a dead baby in a ditch. All these things occurred in Efor’s reminiscences as commonplaces or as commonplace horrors. Shevek had to exercise his imagination and summon every scrap of knowledge he had about Urras to understand them at all. And yet they were familiar to him in a way that nothing he had yet seen here was, and he did understand. (239)

In this sense, then, this life-world component has also the goal-meaning of determining the place to where no one wants to return. In Shevek’s case it goes a step beyond, constituting a personal revolutionary goal of interacting with Urras, if not to bring the revolution itself, at least to restore communication and that possibility. These archic-capitalist commonplaces are not at all such for an Anarresti like Shevek, but the reason why they are more familiar to him than the things he had seen up to

that point is, that that is what the Anarresti learn about Urras: they learn about its dark side, about its horrors. Before talking to the servant Efor, Shevek had only experienced “the beautiful side” of Urras, since he had been invited and received by its government, and had only been shown how rich people live. The estrangement Shevek experiences in the face of these “commonplace horrors” goes to show how there is nothing “normal” about them. These horrors are known to us, ever present and, in this sense, normal. But Shevek’s point of view, as an Anarresti stemming from an anarcho-communist life-world, comes to challenge this passive acceptance.

The second motto is also a motto that answers to a previous state of affairs, but one with much stronger practical meaning for the present:

“Excess is excrement,” Odo wrote in the Analogy. “Excrement retained in the body is a poison.” (Le Guin 2006, 84)

While the first quoted maxim has a rather founding character, the notion of excess plays, in contrast, a role in everyday life. Now, what is excess? This maxim is a dialectical response to capitalism, because the notion of excess itself stems from a hyper-consuming capitalist society, where consumption and accumulation constitute the sense of the lives of its people. Therefore, in Anarres, excess becomes just about anything that goes beyond the threshold of the necessary. Having, or we should say, using more than what you need is a social practice which is frowned upon, when that is a possibility for the individual; and it is simply not possible, when referring to the product of the social organization itself:

To say “this one is mine and that’s yours” in Pravic [the invented language the Anarresti speak], one said, “I use this one and you use that.” (50)

Thus, for example, in the very beautiful description of Abbenay (83-85), it is explained how lighting and heating are set to the bare minimum, going along with daytime and seasons, not because it “was short of power, not with her wind turbines and the earth temperature-differential generators used for heating; but the principle of organic economy was too essential to the functioning of the society not to affect ethics and aesthetics profoundly” (84). Here we can see how this motto determines the life-world of the Anarresti, even beyond their material reality. It is, at least in this and others examples, not the scarcity of Anarres what pushes to a conservative use of resources, but the plain belief that excess is wrong, since it is a distinctive trait of the society they sought to overcome and transcend. In this way, incurring in behavior that may be deemed “excessive” is severely condemned by fellow citizens. This principle makes up a strong value, present in the horizon of all the Odonians. It is their common-sense to use as much as needed and not more, and that even beyond rational justification. Scarcity might play a role at times, as well as a rejection of luxury, but to

condemn excess where there is enough for everyone, reflects an acquired value, taken to be true and operating in everyday life.

The final example goes beyond the dialectical response to archist capitalism and raises itself to a true universal principle, also in a positive sense (not just as the negation of an element of capitalist society):

“The means are the end. Odo said it all her life. Only peace brings peace, only just acts bring justice!” (250)

In our real world, the means-ends dilemma is an open discussion, one that pertains to the whole spectrum of the political divide (from right-wing neocon fascists that will bomb a population out of existence to get oil, to radical Anarchists and Marxists who support armed violent revolution). Neither accepting that “the end justifies the means” nor the denial of this proposition are obvious truths for our society. I do not wish here to argue in favor of this Odonian motto, but I do believe that the notion that the end can justify the means is, indeed, one very proper of societies based on exploitation. The idea that I can have a good, valuable end through “evil” or inadequate means goes only to show the true nature of the end I sought, especially when that which is used as a means is a human being. Be that as it may, this Odonian proposition is no matter for debate in Anarres, it is, in contrast, a self-evident truth that every Anarresti knows to be so, and one that guides them in the practical decisions of every-day life. A good example for this can be seen at the end of the first quoted passage: the reason why the Anarresti do the necessary jobs lies, to a great extent, on the means-ends logic. Work is a mean to an end, but the work is in itself an end. Work is done for its own pleasure and for the result of the work itself, and not for an external end, like money or profit:

Odo wrote ‘A child free from the guilt of ownership and the burden of economic competition will grow up with the will to do what needs doing and the capacity for joy in doing it. It is useless work that darkens the heart. The delight of the nursing mother, of the scholar, of the successful hunter, of the good cook, of the skillful maker, of anyone doing needed work and doing it well —this durable joy is perhaps the deepest source of human affection, and of sociality as a whole.’ (Le Guin 2006, 209)

Odo wrote these words before seeing Anarres come to be. We could claim the same thing today, without knowing if it would ever be true: thus, Anarres comes to presentify a society where this is, indeed the case. The great importance ascribed to work in Odonian thought, as a case of the means-ends identification and, in general, as a topic of its own, can easily be traced to one of Marx’s core thoughts: capitalist labor is alienated, in that it produces the distinction between use-value and exchange-value,

in that the producers are not the owners, in that the end of the activity is separated and, therefore, alienated from the activity itself:

The capitalist does not produce a commodity for its own sake, nor for the sake of its use value, or his personal consumption. The product in which the capitalist is really interested is not the palpable product itself, but the excess value [*Mehrwert*] of the product over the value of the capital consumed by it. (Marx 1964, 51)

On the contrary, in a communist society work would become solidary, an end in itself, an expression of our being, a free act. “Were we to produce as humans,”

[I would] have achieved, in my individual life-expression immediately your life-expression, that is, [I would] have confirmed and realized in my individual activity immediately my true, human essence, my communal-essence [*Gemeinwesen*]. (Marx 1968a, 468)¹⁴

The means-end identification makes up a very strong component of the Anarresti horizons, which determines the way in which they think about practical matters, even at a pre-reflective level. It is quite common in discussions about philosophy or science, to face the question “and what is the use in that?” Such an intuitive response would never appear on Anarres. The idea that one can separate meaningful human work from an external purpose for it, is simply nonsense. “To say that a good end will follow from a bad means is just like saying that if I pull a rope on this pulley it will lift the weight on that one” (Le Guin 2006, 191). This does not mean, of course, that separation itself of means and ends is incomprehensible. The possibility of erring in action by choosing the wrong means to an end stays present, and appears at the level of reflection upon one’s life and decisions. As we can see in this example, referred to Takver, Shevek’s partner, who, when being pregnant, was moved to actions and thoughts she would later condemn, precisely, as violations of this very principle:

That sacrificiality was what Takver had spoken of recognizing in herself when she was pregnant, and she had spoken with a degree of horror, of self-disgust, because she too was an Odonian, and the separation of means and ends was, to her too, false. For her as for him, there was no end. There was process: process was all. (281)

These three mottos have a common element I wish to highlight. As we saw, the life-world is always already there for us, we are born into it, and we inherit from it, amongst other things, these very basic truths about reality that remain as ever-present elements of our horizons. This is the case for us, real humans living in 21st century capitalism, as it is true for the fictional Anarresti. To some extent, this is also

true for us readers, who engage in a conscious reading of a good SF piece. I mean: when we read a novel such as this, we are also thrown into this unknown life-world, with its truths, practices and evidences. The author does not justify the elements that compose this life-world (in the sense of arguing, as if it were a treatise on social theory; or trying to show why these maxims are, indeed, true), any more than our educators and institutions justified the truths they taught us as such. This Anarresti life-world is *given* to us, in an analogous manner as the very world in which we live in is given to us. This, I believe, is a fundamental element that makes to the power of SF as a genre, that allows for interesting political thinking. Free from the constraints of technical discourse, the author can readily show us a possible world and, to some extent, “force us” to accept it as given. Then, the very wholesome and coherent society proposed by Le Guin follows as very possible. One might, of course, be a skeptical reader and refute or deny each of the elements of the novel as they come along. Such practice, though, precludes understanding, be it in fiction or science. Unlike how it is regarding our actual life-world, we can resist foreign ones, be them real (from other cultures, places and times) or fictional, from the SF genre. But still, I believe *The Dispossessed* replicates the given character of the fundamental elements of the life-world it creates, offering the reader the chance of playing along with the proposed world, precisely by accepting, even if only in the neutrality modification of phantasy—that is, without really taking a position, agreeing or disagreeing, just “entertaining the thought”—these given truths that constitute the alternative life-world being portrayed, and thus live in the presentification in phantasy of a possible anarcho-communism.

4. Conclusion

The need for alternatives to our current *status quo* has become very present. Yet, thinking about meaningful alternatives is no easy task. In this article, I have focused my discussion in one particular alternative: Marx’s idea of communism. Be it for its long controversial history in the 20th century, or for the lack of content that characterizes Marx’s original presentation, communism does not usually appear in the contemporary political discourse as a viable path; rather the opposite, it is quickly discarded as a “failed project” or a “naive utopia.” My argument against these notions consists in recuperating the original spirit of Marx’s communism, by understanding that his model was an *undetermined* one. If we share the Marxist critique of capitalism (or societies of exploitation in general), then the *true* alternative to them should be, if only by definition, such a society where exploitation, inequality and oppression are not systemic elements.

But what does that mean? How would such a society look like? Is it really possible?

These are very serious questions in need of different types of answers. One possible way to face this challenge, or so I have argued, is through the means of the SF genre. I believe SF to be a very powerful tool to think about alternative societies in general, and communism in particular. The reason for this can be made clear through Husserl's phenomenological theory: *bound phantasy* is the means through which we can create new worlds, while still holding them to the standards we set up for them: while phantasy in general allows for the human capacity of creating fiction, it also allows for the binding of such fictions to known truths about the world. The product of such an exercise is, therefore, a coherent and wholesome work, that is not only "internally coherent" but also holds a relation to the actual world as we know it. In particular, what fiction like *The Dispossessed* creates is a life-world, a new whole of truths, habits, practices, evidences and material realities upon which the fictional, but seemingly possible characters, stand and live.

The wholeness and boundedness of *The Dispossessed*—as the case-study I chose—serve, then, as a means to presentify Marx's empty and undetermined idea of communism. On the one hand, because phantasy, as a form of presentification, serves to bring to intuition propositions that are otherwise empty, devoid of content. Of course, one novel cannot possibly presentify the whole of a society or life-world, nor does it intend to. But it does bring totally empty ideas to some degree of intuitiveness, which can be crucial to understand matters such as social-political theory and maybe even political practice. On the other hand, the fact that this undetermined idea gains one possible determination through a coherent and *bounded* phantasy shows, precisely, that such thing could be possible: that the very general demand of having a society without property and classes can be exemplified in a social organization, in habits, science, art, language. The different elements of the life-world are shown in the novel, and their interplay is built not as a mere free fantasy, but as a coherent whole, bound to our knowledge of human history, nature and society. *The Dispossessed* illustrates not a child's dream, nor a merely thinkable scenario, but a very powerful possibility. And such alternative possibilities can play a defining role in our political thinking, because, after all, "revolution begins in the thinking mind" (Le Guin, 280).



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Notes

¹ It is the standard use in the phenomenological literature to write "fantasy" with "ph," "phantasy." I will do this as well when I am using the concept in the technical phenomenological sense, while spelling "fantasy" when I am not using it in the technical sense.

² Examples outside the domain of the material world can quickly turn rather technical and complex. For example, mathematical objects such as numbers are given through acts of counting and collecting; abstract objects are given through acts of abstraction and generalization.

³ All quotations from texts originally in German are my own translations.

⁴ This can serve to illustrate the difference between internal coherence and boundedness: a story may be perfectly coherent, in that it sets its own rules and principles and abides by them, without these having any reference to the world as it is, in other words, without binding them to specific known principles. The genre of magic realism could count as a good example for this.

⁵ Think, for example of Larry Niven's *Ringworld*, where the Dyson sphere (or a version of it) comes to life in a manner that aims to be bound by physics.

⁶ For a detailed discussion of the concept of horizon, see Walton 2003.

⁷ Cf. Husserl 1976, Part III.B and Gurwitsch 1957.

⁸ Cf. Walton 2003, 12. "Even if I can freely phantasy on the world as actually experienced world, 'I am tied,' as Husserl says, 'to the form of nature and the apperception of nature.' (*Hua* XXIII, 562) On the other hand, worlds of imagination, may be conceived of as alternative

possibilities with reference to which the real world is to be transformed, and, when so appropriated as habitable worlds, contribute to a refiguration of reality.”

⁹ As a nice example of “communist-like” planning, the following passage from Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Green Mars* may serve to illustrate the difference between both senses of private property. The scene takes place in the context of a conference, where a declaration as to how Mars should be organized was produced:

“We have to argue all of it! Even if you want no state, or a minimal state, then you still have to argue it point by point. Especially since most minimalists want to keep exactly the economic and police system that keeps them privileged. That’s libertarians for you— anarchists who want police protection from their slaves. No! If you want to make the minimum-state case, you have to argue it from the ground up.”

“But,” Mikhail said, “I mean, *inheritance* law?”

“Sure, why not? This is critical stuff! I say there should be no inheritance at all, except for a few personal objects passed on, perhaps. But all the rest should go back to Mars. It’s part of the gift, right?”

“All the rest?” Vlad inquired with interest. “But what would that consist of, exactly? No one will own any of the land, water, air, the infrastructure, the gene stock, the information pool—what’s left to pass on?”

Coyote shrugged. “Your house? Your savings account? I mean, won’t we have money? And won’t people stockpile surpluses of it if they can?” (1994, 403-404)

¹⁰ On this issue, cf. Moylan 2014, 87-92.

¹¹ This does not mean, of course, that the whole world is the exact same life-world. Differences are obviously present and, as we mentioned, different cultures and forms of social organization amount to different life-worlds. What I wish to claim here is that the relations of production in the world are capitalist and that the different life-worlds make up one unitary capitalist life-world.

¹² A more exhaustive description of Anarres in economical, political and social terms can be found in Moylan 2014, 91-95.

¹³ It is worth noting, that even though the issue of State and law is a rather political one and thus, more closely connected to anarchism, the understanding of the revolution in terms of the development of contradictions striving to its resolution, clearly stems from a Marxist conception of how society progresses.

¹⁴ Cf. also Marx 1968b, 516-518 for a relevant description of human work in comparison to what animals do.

